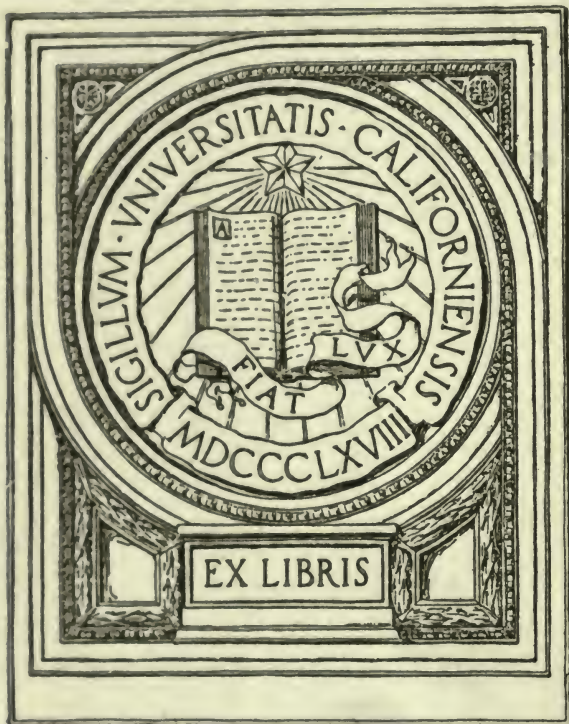


KING PENDA'S CAPTAIN



GIFT OF
Professor W.A. Setchell



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KING PENDA'S CAPTAIN

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Feargus stepped to the side of Edwy and drew his sword, shouting,
"I am your captain: stand back, Mercians!"

KING PENDA'S CAPTAIN

A ROMANCE OF FIGHTING
IN THE DAYS
OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS

BY
MAC KENZIE MAC BRIDE



WITH
COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
JOHN DUNCAN

LONDON
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KING PENDA'S CAPTAIN

CHAPTER I

OF FEARGUS AND KING PENDA

IT chanced in the days when the preaching of Augustine and his followers had stirred all England from the Tyne to the Thames and the English sea that there arose in the Midlands, by the waters of Trent, a king of the Mercians named Penda, son of Wybba, who, though he counted full fifty years when he came to be king, had spirit like to that of a young man, and he was a great warrior and faithful unto death to that which he held true. When he saw the people of the lands around him casting over the gods of their forefathers and following the new faith he was wrath, and the more so with Northumbria, which had far outstripped the other nations of the Angles under its noble and mighty king. For Edwin

had broken the old gods and brought under his overlordship the countrymen of Penda, and the North Angles, the Middle Angles, East Angles, and Southumbrians or men of Lindesey. Penda had seen all these things but had bided his time, though the great heart in him beat hard as he beheld. And when he came to be king he saw himself beset with foes: on the one hand his people were hemmed in by the Welsh and West Saxons, on the other by the North English and Middle English, East Angles and Lindiswaras or Lindeseymen, while towering above all was impregnable Northumbria. When Penda arose the heathen people, seeing the front of him, rallied, and he led them forth and conquered: his sword fell first upon his near neighbours the North Angles, Middle Angles, East Angles, and Southumbrians, and he brought them in under him. And, the heathen people still gathering to his banner, he tore the lands to the west from the West Saxons and overthrew king Cadwalla of Wales. Then the Welsh king, seeing what a mighty man was Penda, joined hands with him, and together they brought the kingdom of Wessex to their feet. So everywhere the Mercians had the victory. Then, at length, king Edwin lifted his war brand

and gathered together a mighty host and went to meet the Mercians, but in a great fight Penda overthrew the Northumbrians, and Edwin himself was slain. So the power of Northumbria waned, until its new king, Oswald, roused himself, and went forth to help the Christian East Anglians against Penda, and with him went a mighty host. When Penda heard of his coming, he looked to his men and sent out ships bearing a messenger to one Nechtan of the Hundred Battles, a great chief among the Albanich or Picts, who, though most of the Pictish tribes had adopted the new religion, still stood by the old gods of his race. Now battle was to Nechtan as the breath of his nostrils, so that, though he cared less for his faith than did Penda for Odin and Thor and Freya, yet, whenever they brought him the summons he arose, and taking with him his son Feargus, and the most tried of his warriors, as many as the ships would carry, he sailed south for the land of Mercia.

Great was the joy of Penda at gaining so mighty a chief to his aid, and they went out together to meet king Oswald. Then Penda took command of the one half of that great host and Nechtan with his son Feargus of the other. And Penda fought with great might, and king Nechtan like-

wise, and his son Feargus. And it chanced in the midst of the fight that Penda saw the Pictish chief stumble, and ran forward to catch him, and carried him to his tent. Then the son of Nechtan was wrath at the wounding of the king his father, and he led his men so cunningly, as did also the mighty Penda, that the forces of Oswald were routed, and Oswald himself was slain. So Penda was greatly pleased with the hardihood of Nechtan and of his son, and before they went forth to their own land he begged the Pictish king to leave the youth, Feargus, with him to be his man, and he would, on his side, train him up in all manly ways. Now Nechtan was loth to part with his best captain, for, though yet but a boy, such he deemed his son, Feargus, but at length, for love of Penda and for that great service he had done him on the field of battle, he agreed.

“For well I wot,” said he, “that home-keeping youths have homely wits, and I know there is not such a warrior as Penda the world through.”

So Feargus put his hands between the hands of Penda and became his man, and swore on his father's sword to be faithful and obedient, and to stand by the king in all matters soever. Then,



So Feargus put his hands between the hands of Penda,
and became his man.

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after a short sojourn for the healing of his wound, king Nechtan departed, leaving behind a company of two hundred Picts, especially chosen for their size and strength and hardihood, to serve his son.

CHAPTER II

OF FEARGUS AND TORFRIDA

So Feargus stayed behind with king Penda, and soon his name became known through all the land. Though he was yet ungrown, men looked upon him as a man, for so was he limbed; and such was he for hardihood and cunning with all weapons that he soon excelled all the captains of the king. In stature he towered above his fellows, and his strength was like that of two men. He sought no fight nor feared any, yet his enemies were adread of him; but not less loved was he of his friends, and his manners were so mild, withal, that the poorest might speak with him familiarly. Besides Feargus, were other captains of Penda, chief among whom were his sons Peada and Wulfere; and Osbert, son to the king of the North English,¹ with his brothers Godwine, Thorkill, and Tosti and his cousin Edgar. These were rich and

The land of the North English lay between the Trent and the Don including the present Nottinghamshire.

great, and there were also many kings and nobles gathered about the city of Tamworth, the chief town of Mercia. Of these was one Sigmund, king of the Lindiswaras, who, with his daughter Torfrida, was much about the hall of Penda. So Feargus dwelt among the Mercians and they fought many battles, and great was their gain, and the cause of the Christians waned before them. But gradually the spirit of the new faith fell upon its enemies and even Sigmund, the chief friend of Penda, drifted slowly over, and with him went his daughter Torfrida. So that when Penda made war on the Christian king of the East Anglians, Sigmund no longer followed him and he was wrath. Now we have seen that Torfrida had been much about the hall of Penda, for the old warrior loved the little maiden, and felt his hearth brighter for her presence; but when Sigmund withheld from Penda in his war on king Anna of East Anglia, Torfrida was denied king Penda's halls and great sorrow fell upon Feargus. For the youth now learned that he loved the damsel, now when he dare no longer make it known to Penda or to herself; for the king had said that he must not enter Sigmund's land; so Feargus went forth to the fight heavy-hearted.

And when they wended homeward after harrying and burning the lands of the Christians he sighed for Torfrida; and so one night he mounted his horse in secret and, taking a clarsach, or small harp, and a minstrel's cloak, rode away eastward, and still rode through the next day until he won Sigmund's land. Being dressed as a minstrel no one heeded him, for minstrels were held in great honour amongst the English as amongst the Albanich, and as he rode he made a little song. He entered the town of Lindum, which was set on a high hill, and sought out the king's halls, and there in the garden beheld Torfrida walking to and fro with head downcast and greeting,¹ and ever and anon wringing her small hands. She was as fair as an April morning and not less fresh and fragrant; like a golden river her hair fell over her white throat and shoulders to her waist; deep blue were her eyes and her forehead low and straight and square; pink cheeks she had, and parted lips—fit guardians of her precious breath, if breathe indeed like common folk she did. "Now," thought Feargus, "if she weeps for me I am glad of my coming; but gin she greets for other cause, and this new faith hath hardened her

¹ Weeping.

against her old friends, then will the head of Feargus hang this night over the lintel of king Sigmund, and Penda will know that Feargus hath broken his word which as a youth he swore on his father's sword, and his name will go down without honour among the Albanich, and his enemy Osbert will rejoice." Then Feargus walked out towards the garden and, drawing his harp, sang the simple song which he had made in riding through the woods that morning. Done with great freedom from the old English into the new it ran thus:—

MY HEART DOTH BEAT

" My heart doth beat for thou art fair,
As Luga's shower ¹ thy glowing hair,
As down thy soft white cheeks and red,
As fleecy clouds thy pale forehead.

" Oh, never man had love so meet,
Oh, never maiden face so sweet,
Oh, ne'er will be so sad a heart
As mine shouldst thou bid me depart.

" But shouldst thou whisper, ' Lover, stay,
I cannot live an thou'rt away,
So I the whole world will defy
To have my sweetheart ever nigh; '

¹ The flood of light which fell from the sun when hurled through the heavens every morning by Luga or Lugh the Gaelic sun god.

“ Then all these clouds will turn to rose
As at an August evening's close,
And mating song-birds in the brake
Will sing of love for thy dear sake.”

Torfrida paused in her walk when the first notes fell upon her ear. She heard the song right through and smiled sadly and wept a little, and then turned swiftly and ran through the green bushes and threw her arms round the tall minstrel with a little cry of joy. And when she had found her tongue she said—

“ Feargus, O Feargus! what dost thou here? If the men of Sigmund do but see thee, then neither I nor any other can save thee.”

“ Then thou art of a mind, sweet Torfrida, to save the enemy of Sigmund and the conqueror of the Christians.”

“ Thou hast wronged me if ever thou hast thought that I could betray thee; but what brings thee here? ” she added, with a woman's disingenuousness.

“ Thyself, Torfrida.”

“ Myself! ”

“ Nay now, thou well knowest 'tis thyself; never since the day thy father took thee away has there been any joy in the world for Feargus, nor will be till thou art back.”

“ Back, ah! that I will never be, noble Feargus, slayer of Christians though thou art—but get thee hence, for hast thou not broken Penda’s bidding by coming into this land? ”

“ That have I, and that must I again, if I may not see thee without, for thou, Torfrida, hast the heart of Feargus.”

“ And thou that of Torfrida.”

Long time they stood with hands locked, and much they spake, till the maidens of Torfrida came out to seek their mistress. Then said Torfrida, “ Never again must thou come, O Feargus, for an the men of Penda or of my father caught thee, even though death were not dealt to thee, thou wouldest be for ever disgraced.”

“ I cannot live without seeing thee, sweet Torfrida, and must come.”

“ Nay, rather will I ride forth to meet thee on Penda’s land than that thou shouldst break thine oath to the king.”

“ Brave indeed thou art, but I am loth to break my faith with the old man, though sorry that thou shouldst run into danger.”

“ Nay, little danger will it be to me in my father’s land, and in Penda’s thy presence will shield me from all questions.”

And so they left it, and many times Torfrida rode out to meet her lover on the verge of king Penda's land.

And Penda waxed more and more bitter against the Christians, while Feargus's ardour grew less and less as he learnt something of their faith from Torfrida, for hard she beset him. At length it fell one evening that king Sigmund asked for his daughter, and her maidens could not find her; high and low they looked, but in vain, till at nightfall she returned, and Sigmund asked whither she had been, and Torfrida blushed and at length told the king her father, and he was much angered.

"So thou hast been holding tryst with thy father's foe, and thou a Christian!"

Then Torfrida wept and asked forgiveness.

"Nay, I cannot forgive thee till thou hast broken this bond with young Feargus. The Christian may not wed with the worshipper of false gods. I little thought that child of mine could wish to wed with one who had lifted his hand against me."

And then Sigmund sent for the priest who dwelt with them, and he was wrath and forbade her trysting with Feargus, and they kept her a prisoner

in her room until such times, said her father, as she promised to abandon her lover.

And at the end of a month they came to her for an answer, and she said: " Never will I break my troth with Feargus, or wed other, Christian or heathen, for that I love him; and where love is, God will not and man may not come between; if he is infidel, will he not surely need a Christian to wife the more? "

And there was anger between Sigmund and Torfrida, for he was wishful that she should strengthen his hands by wedding a Christian king. So Torfrida sent her brother Edwy secretly to meet Feargus at their tryst, to bid him beware, and Feargus turned homewards heavy-hearted.

Now it happened that at this time Penda sent Feargus as a messenger to Northumbria, and there he fell in with one of the Christian priests of his own race, who took a liking to the young Pict, and Feargus, being by no means as bitter against the Christian as was his master Penda, listened to all he had to say, and received it kindly. So that before leaving he told the priest if it had not been for his duty to the old king and to his father, he would have almost become a Christian, where-upon the priest tried to show him that being of

this mind his duty to his Maker was before that to his king and father.

“Such is not the law of my father’s people,” said Feargus, “for if I betray my trust to my master, how will I be fit to keep that to the God of the Christians. If thou canst overcome the old king with thy reasoning I will be glad, but if thou canst not, then must I yet stand by him to the end, and his enemies will still be mine.”

Feargus went his way southward till he won home again, but from that day much of the merry youthfulness of him died, and he walked with knotted brow and doubting heart and no longer sang blithely the war songs of the Albanich, but chose the plaintive and sorrowful ones instead, that suited best his spirit. And he could see dimly that in the days to come the new faith would rise triumphant over all lets and hindrances soever, for in it was truth so great and so plain withal that men had but to hearken to be overcome, and in the future he saw trouble for Penda and trouble for himself.

And when he reached home he found that Penda was making ready to march upon king Sigmund and had sworn to burn his city and harry his land, and Feargus was much troubled; for he

knew that he must lift his hand against the kin of Torfrida—and what might not happen to her in the press and thick of the fight, when men spared neither old nor young; and how would her people let her marry with him who entered their land as a destroyer? And one day, as he was riding abroad, a man dressed as a beggar came up and drew close to him and whispered as he passed, and Feargus started, and, gathering his reins from the beast's neck, rode on all that night and, at the morning, came to a wood. By this he lingered, until at noon he heard the sound of hoofs and saw Torfrida with two maidens accompanying her on palfreys; and he took her in his arms and kissed her, and saw that she was pale and care-worn.

“ I have come, O Feargus, to ask thee to spare my father and my kin for love of me; for know I well and all the world that if king Penda marches against us, my father will be overthrown; for his might is not like that of Penda, nor his captains like Penda's captains.”

Then the water burst forth his eyes as he answered, “ I would do much to serve king Penda, more would I do to serve thee; yet to Penda I plighted myself before I plighted myself to thee,

and on my father's sword I swore, so I cannot break my troth, sweet Torfrida, though my heart be torn in twain with grief for thee. Let me tell thee, also, Torfrida, that since I saw thee I have been persuaded that thy new faith is true, and that a greater power than of Penda's will be needed to tear it from men's minds. Yet I am his man; he is old and I would not desert him at this hour, even though I could without dishonour; for the old man, grim though he be at times, is steadfast in friendship as he is terrible in battle, and from a youth he hath cared for me and taught me as his son and not less steadfast shall he find me."

"Thou hast said thou lovest me above all things else, yet wilt thou destroy me and my kin; thou art a Christian, yet wilt thou destroy the Christians."

"A hard saying is that thou hast said: weep not so, my golden-haired one—thy sickness hath turned thy mind in this matter—in a different mood thou spokest when last we met in this place."

"Call me no longer thy golden-haired one, and get thee hence, thou killer of Christians; with the aid of thee and thine Sigmund might turn the

battle against Penda, but thou hast denied it; get thee hence; never more shalt thou gaze upon Torfrida."

"Say not so—thou art beside thyself, and thy father hath prevailed upon thee to say these things—thou wilt not away, Torfrida, till I take my farewell of thee!"

But Torfrida pulled her rein and smote her horse and rode on, and Feargus neither moved nor spoke, but white like a dead man stood and gazed after her.

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLE BY TRENT WATER

BUT a few days later king Penda's host was ready and they marched eastwards from the town of Lichfield, where Penda was then staying, intending to cross the Trent water below Nottingham, which stood beside the forest of Sherwood. And soon king Sigmund knew of Penda's coming and started out to meet him, with all his strength, and thinking to fall upon him before he reached Trent, marched west from Lindum city, then, crossing the river, turned southwards through the forest. But Penda learnt of his coming, and in the night time hastening on with swiftness, took up a strong position below the high banks which skirt the river to the east a little below Nottingham. There he hid his men among the woods on the banks above, and mid the broom on the plain below, leaving the lowlands to the westward free to the Lindeseymen. And Feargus was in great sorrow at finding himself of the party. And

through the day there was no stir or sound amongst all that great host. At length towards evening they beheld the banners of their foes. Then the Mercians sprung to life, and they filled all the narrow plain that lay between the cliffs and the river with foot, and the left wing with the horse under Osbert marched south hoping to reach the rear, ready to ford the stream and attack the Lindeseymen from the west and so drive them in upon the archers and footmen of Feargus and Wulfere, who, hidden by the wood and brambles, lined all the cliffs on the east side of Trent. In the narrow plain below, opposite the ford, stood Penda, commanding the centre and waiting without movement the coming of Sigmund. Soon the plain to the north and west was filled with a great array of foot and horsemen, and when Feargus beheld them from his post on the cliff his heart fluttered and he forgot his troubles a while, for he was in very soul a warrior and the sight of that armed host was like strong wine to him. Sigmund had meanwhile sent a large party of bowmen across the river to hold the cliffs. Feargus thereupon called to Wulfere to command the bowmen, while he gathered his foot and went out to meet the foe, seeing that the men

who must decide this battle were in his hand. The enemy below being now within bowshot, the bowmen of Wulfere sent a shower of arrows forth such as astonished those men of Lindesey; for till now they had seen no sign of life in the wood or anywhere but in front of them, where fluttered the banner of Penda. And they marched on, their ranks falling in whole lines before the terrible arrows, which flew from the very cliffs which Sigmund had sent the flower of his army to win, thinking that the Mercians had only just arrived. Still the white-haired Penda sat motionless upon his beast and took no note of the weak reply that was made to them by the archers Sigmund had kept with him. Then suddenly a great cry arose in the rear of Sigmund's army, as the horsemen of Osbert, who had worked round to their flank from the south, fell upon them, followed by many companies of foot. Sigmund looked anxiously to where his bow and footmen should be, on the cliff, but at that moment the Picts under Feargus, with Welsh from Wales, and Welsh also who still dwelt in Mercia, and with the famous British bowmen of Arden and the Warwickshire woodlands under king Penda, and many English, burst out from the woods; and they drove the

Lindeseymen before them like sheep, so fiercely and suddenly they leapt forth. Then was the heather blood bedewed, and the golden broom turned to red, and ever the Picts and Welsh pushed on and the men of Sigmund held back, till at last they were driven over the cliffs, and Feargus sent the Welsh after them down the bank, they being lightest of foot. And they beat them down towards the plain below where was king Sigmund. And the arrows of the Mercians darkened the very lift, and Penda himself had now moved on against the king, and when he beheld him Sigmund was adread, and his warriors stood still; for all men went in fear of Penda. Then Sigmund saw his men driven down from the cliffs to the north-east before the dread cry "Albanich! Albanich!" and he knew that there were Feargus and his Picts. And still he cried, "On, on!" but little room was there left for sword play on that narrow strath by the great river, for the press of the men driven in by Feargus on the east and by Osbert on the west became so great that friend struck friend unwittingly, and no man had room to ply his arms. King Sigmund down in the glen now saw that all was lost, and he wound his horn that those who could might

escape, and himself, with many good footmen, held the ford against the centre of the Mercian host led by Penda. Slowly but grimly Sigmund gave back, step by step, until many of his bowmen had gained the west side of Trent water, and then all that remained plunged into the river and fled towards the forest with the king. And shouts of "Kill, kill!" arose from the Mercians and, like dogs let loose, they broke their ranks and fell upon the fugitives.

Then Feargus wound his horn and strove to stay the slaughter, but little sense had the most of them left; they were drunk with blood, and only his own men gathered around him. And the rush of the Lindeseymen was ever towards Lindum, their city; some fled through the forest there to ford the stream, and some turned east and made their way into the fens, and the Mercians followed those that fled through the forest and those that fled up the east bank of Trent. Feargus's thoughts were for Torfrida and to save Sigmund, if it might be. Seeing that Penda had kept together a great body of men about him and was safe from surprise, Feargus horsed as many of his followers as he could find beasts for, and the rest held each a stirrup and ran with them afoot.

The chase lasted till midnight when they came within sight of Sigmund's city of Lincoln or Lindum, which stood high on a great hill; but already the Mercians were at its gates; some had scaled the walls and some were in fight with the fugitives as they came up. Riding hard across the plain below, Feargus saw fire burst from one of the ports; a great shout followed, and now all the sky was filled with flames and smoke and myriads of sparks; for a moment the men slackened their speed, awestricken, at the savage sight. Feargus saw that the town had fallen, and, leaving his men behind, dashed on like a madman. When he neared the gate the fire lighted up the bloody hands and faces of the besiegers, flushed with drink and victory, and he shuddered as he beheld them—little mercy would king or lady get from these men, and, spurring his horse, he burst through the press, and when they heard his cry, "Albanich! Albanich!" they made way, though with curses at being turned from their prey. Through the burning town he rode; one or two tried to stay him, but he dashed them fiercely aground, and at last drew up by the hall of Sigmund. Here the press was thicker, and he saw the door was down and the drunken rout were in; and coarse jests and

oaths and shrieks filled the air. Then Feargus sprang from his beast and burst in, crying, "Back, back!" but the soldiers heeded him not, and one even turned and struck him. Now a giant was Feargus, his red head stood out a full span above the dark-haired Britons of Arden forest and the pale-haired English of the towns, and he laid hold of him who struck, by the waist, and lightly tossed him out through the open door, and then, not wishing to slay any, seized an oaken staff and dealt blows right and left; each one he struck was quickly sobered and asked for no more. At length he gained the hall. There he found the Mercians gathered also, but he burst through them to the king's chamber where he beheld Sigmund's youngest son, Edwy, with half-a-dozen stalwart thanes. At his feet lay his two brothers, dead; while behind, crouching to the floor, her hands clasped in prayer and her knees wet with the blood of the slain, was Torfrida. Hard bestead were those brave Lindeseymen, and wounded and sore with fighting; before them were many Mercian thanes, while others tried to force a way in at the door. These Feargus roughly seized and thrust to right and left until he won in.

“Stay, Mercians,” he shouted to the combatants, but they heeded him not, and so, pushing one away, he stepped to the side of Edwy and drew his sword, shouting, “I am your captain: stand back, Mercians!”

Then, seeing who it was that bid them, they forbore.

“Enough killing have ye done this day,” said he. Then, speaking to Edwy, he pledged his safety; so Edwy submitted, he and the thanes, as his prisoners. Feargus turned to Torfrida, but she had fainted; so he lifted her and carried her out into the air, for the building was all aflame, and they followed. At the gate Feargus found Duncan, his captain and many of his men seeking him, and he sent round and gathered the rest, with many English and Welsh who loved him, and they placed the prisoners in their midst and rode towards Penda’s land. As they went they found that the more part of the city had been burnt by the Mercians; and Feargus was heavy-hearted for Torfrida’s kin, and his conscience pricked him for the slaying of so many Christians. And no man knew whence king Sigmund had departed.

Now it chanced that Penda had been told of

the love of Feargus for Torfrida, by Osbert, his enemy; and, though the king loved Feargus much, he felt anger against him, and Osbert had even advised him secretly to seize the Pict. So when Penda learnt from the thanes who had slain her two brethren, of the saving of Torfrida and Edwy by Feargus, he sent for the prisoners, and ordered Torfrida to be imprisoned and the boy Edwy and his thanes to be slain. When Feargus heard of this he hied him to Penda and stood up, and said he—

“O king Penda, sore have we wrought against Sigmund and his kin, and many men of his have we slain, little boots it to slay this boy or the faithful thanes who fought for him, in cold blood. Right well they wrought and soldierly against thy thanes, but an unsoldierly death wouldst thou deal to them; oh, never will the light of day seem fair to thy captain Feargus if the blood of these warriors stains the sword of his king. Doth the conqueror of Edwin, and Oswald, and Sigeberht, and Ceanwealh, and Sigmund need the blood of a boy who hath only once wielded war brand?”

“I have spoken,” said the king; “thou art over bold.”

Then said Feargus again, "Call me not so, king Penda; never canst thou mean that this boy must die and no greater thing against him than that he was ready to stand up fighting to the last, as though he had been in full manhood."

"That surely I mean."

"Then, O king, for the fellowship that is between us give not thy hand to this work, for not only will it hurt me—for the Albanich war not on children—but thee, also, will it hurt before the eyes of all the world."

"I have said, and thou and all here have but to obey, and there are few, as thou wottest, who would have dared, as thou hast, to look askance at what I do; but ware thee lest thou carriest this thing too far, and keep well thy tongue. These and all the enemies of Odin shall die."

"Thou hast gained a victory over Sigmund and great will thy praise be, and I, though no kin of thine, in payment of thy teaching for years past, have done something to get thee that victory and many more besides like to it, yet thou wilt not grant me so little a boon as this boy's life and this maiden's liberty, even though

as thou wottest they are Albanich by the mother's side, if not of my tribe."

"Get thee hence," roared the king, "thou art forgetting thyself; hence and stay till I send for thee: hence, I say!"

CHAPTER IV

THE FLIGHT

FEARGUS went forth from Penda's hall in an angry mood and sought out Edwy as he was being taken to the tower wherein they were to cast him and spoke in his ear. The killing was fixed for the morrow. At midnight Feargus arose, and, taking his sword, entered the king's stable and led therefrom seven beasts of best blood with all their trappings, riding them into the forest hard by the town. He then went to the building wherein lay Edwy with his thanes; he whistled thrice, till one appeared at the window high up in the tower. Then Feargus drew forth a light cord and threw it up that they caught it, and therewith drew up a stouter one. Fastening this above, they slid down it to the ground, until the whole seven of them stood beside him, the last to descend being the boy Edwy.

"Thou art great of heart for thy years, brother, and gentle withal," said Feargus; "thy stout-

ness will all be needed this night; but for thy sister Torfrida have no fear, for I swear to thee that nought ill shall befall her while I have life; and if I die, my kin and thine shall avenge her; so be ye comforted. She should have ridden with thee this night, but she is prisoned in the very halls of the king where none may enter." Then, having reached the wood, they mounted their beasts and Feargus kissed the boy, and "May the God of the Christians speed ye," said he, and they departed.

Then Feargus returned to his lodging and threw himself down; but he was uneasy for Torfrida's safety so that he slept little, and in the morning he arose betimes and donned his arms and went forth. He had gone but a little way before he heard a great noise and saw many people running hither and thither, so he asked one, Oscar, the king's seneschal, what might be amiss.

"Have you not heard, noble Feargus, that the youth Edwy Sigmundsson with all his thanes have broken their prison, and have entered the king's stable and taken therefrom seven fleet horses and are away. And the king is so wrath that all men are adread of him."

“ Seek no more, good Oscar, for here at your hand is the thief and the prison-breaker.”

“ What mean you? ”

“ That I, Feargus, let the birds free and broke the king’s stable.”

“ If thou wilt be advised thou wilt tell none other that news.”

“ Thanks to thee; but the king hath an evil counsellor who will see my hand in this and will be ready to do my cause an injury therewith, so I will hie me straight to Penda and be before-hand with him.”

“ Then may the gods defend thee, for never saw I the king more wrath.”

So Feargus turned him towards the hall where the king sat; there he found Penda, white with rage, fiercely pacing the floor. At his side was Osbert, who, as he turned and saw Feargus, started violently, for his name had been at that moment on his lips.

“ Call in thy messengers, king Penda,” said Feargus, “ for vainly they seek Edwy Sigmundson; he is away, and he who set him free and broke thy stable for beasts to carry him and his thanes stands before thee.”

Then the king swore a great oath, and snatch-

ing up a heavy spear which stood beside him, hurled it at the speaker; but Feargus moved quickly aside and the weapon flew past him and, striking the wall, buried itself therein. Feargus stood still again, calmly eyeing the king. Not so, however, his captain Duncan, who was ever at his back, eagle-eyed but jovial of countenance; as the king threw, his sword leapt over his shoulder whereupon he carried it, and the king being without arms drew back a pace.

“Put up thy sword, good Duncan,” said Feargus, “and pray the king to pardon thee, for thou wert ever hasty; but no thought of unfaithfulness to the king hadst thou, that will I be sworn.”

“Now I pray thee, king Penda, that though thou mayest not pardon me, thou wilt pardon my faithful and much-loved Duncan, in whom thy friend my father had great pride; for not among all thy men canst thou find his equal.”

Now the king ever loved boldness, and in secret smiled at Duncan, though fiercely he spake.

“Well thou sayest, else death should have both him and thee, for all that I am not unmindful of thy services: it shall be long ere thou shalt

again stand in this hall. Take thou," he said, turning to the seneschal Oscar, " the chief Feargus, and put him in the great tower, and with water and bread feed him, and there let him remain."

So they took Feargus, who went readily, and they treated him fair, he being much beloved by them, and left him his sword, for no need had they, said Oscar, to put a slight upon him who stood so well in the sight of all men. But great was the wrath of the Picts when they saw their chief led away captive; for they cared not for Penda, or whether he were Christian or whether heathen, but only for their leader, and him they followed through the town to his prison, with Duncan at their head; and they were mighty and tall men and thick of limb, and ever ready in a desperate fight. Then Feargus minded them of the wishes of Nechtan their king, telling them to obey Penda and stay quiet. So they obeyed, but of their own will divided themselves into two bodies, the one half of them lying down outside the prison of Feargus, and the other half beneath the windows of Torfrida. So they kept Feargus in knowledge of all that happened, and he was greatly comforted to know they lay and watched for Torfrida. And daily they played outside his

prison on the clarsach and on the pipes the noble songs of the Albanich.

When Penda heard that they lay day and night outside the prison of their chief and of Torfrida, he was not unpleased, for he loved ever the faithful and the bold, and was secretly ashamed that he had been led into cruelty, such as had never stained his name, by Osbert's evil influence. So at length, after a month had passed, he minded him of their services and sent for Duncan, who pleaded hard for Torfrida that she might be set free; for such was the wish of Feargus. The king's heart smote him for Torfrida, but Osbert and his brethren and Edgar his cousin told him that Feargus loved Torfrida and was himself being converted to the faith of the Christians and would yet be on the side of Sigmund and the Northumbrians. And though Penda refused to believe that Feargus could be unfaithful to him, yet he was swayed somewhat by their counsel oft repeated. So Feargus still chafed in his prison and was much troubled about many matters. There was little hope that he might ever again see Torfrida, and he had much doubt in his mind, for that the king was so deadly an enemy to the Christians, of whom he himself was one; yet the

idea of leaving Penda he could not brook. Two months passed and they brought him word that Torfrida lay sick, and he ground his teeth and beat his breast in despair; then Duncan, with Alastair, his captains, wished him to let them break his prison and release Torfrida and depart with her to Alban.

“What would then happen to all ye who stayed behind,” said he, “nothing less than death, and how would Nechtan think of him who had broken oath to Penda and left his men to die? Nay, good Duncan, it cannot be. Never will I break troth with thee or with the king.”

Then Duncan went once more to Penda and said—

“Now, king, we come from our chief, the noble Feargus, than whom thou hast no more faithful soldier, to pray thee to set free the lady Torfrida, his true love, who now lieth sick; for she hath been bred in the halls of kings and not in dungeons, and in the darkness fadeth. Ill hast thou requited our chief for all he hath wrought for thee, and us his clansmen, who have wielded war brands for thee. Thy manner of treating thy warriors is little like to that of the noble chiefs of our land, king Brude and king Nechtan.”

Half angry at Duncan and half merry at his boldness, Penda said, "Thy master hath in thee a saucy servant; in sooth thou art fitter to deal blows than to deliver messages."

Then he turned to Osbert and Edgar and together they spoke, and the king was for freeing Torfrida, but Osbert counselled the king, and he said, "Go back to the chief and tell him that Torfrida shall go free to her father's land with many to keep her in safety, but only if he swears to hold no tryst with her, nor seek, nor see, nor speak with her more for ever."

Then the merry face of Duncan darkened and his eyes flashed angrily. "Now woe am I to take back so sad a message, and woe shall it be to him who comes between where true love is."

"Out, impudent dog, or such freedom as I offer her shall be denied."

So Duncan, full of anger, betook himself back to the tower of Feargus and told him the message. Then the strong man broke down, and he saw in this not the hand of Penda only, but of his enemies.

The days passed and still they came with long faces stammering out that she was worse, and nightly in his thoughts he beheld the sweet and

tender one in the dark cell, where the golden hair shone in vain for none might see and admire. Many days he endured till at last they brought him word that she lay dying, and his heart stood still. Then in his grief he sent for Duncan and told him, "Go thou and seek king Penda, for I cannot live thus longer; tell him that Feargus will promise anything, do anything, if he will but release the lady Torfrida. And I swear to thee, my captain, that an she dies, then will I strike the proud king dead (though I know he liketh me well), and Osbert and Edgar my enemies atop of him, and over all that death pile shall I lie sword stricken in the hall of Penda."

So Duncan went again to Penda, taking with him Alastair his cousin, the others waiting about outside, and they two agreed that if the king refused, then they would fall upon him and kill him while the others should release Torfrida, seize the king's sons, Peada and Wulfere, and getting them all aboard ship, sail to their own land, they knowing well that nothing would happen to Feargus while the king's sons were in their hands. Then Duncan told Penda that Torfrida lay a-dying and that his master was nigh beside himself. This time the king was alone,

save for his sons, who were good men both, and the king said—

“ So my little Torfrida dwineth—so shall all the enemies of the gods; yet I am sorry that it should have come to thee, child. Thou wert ever a favourite with me, Torfrida! Penda was not wont to war with children. Set her free, good Duncan, set her free, and see to it that she lacketh nothing; and thou sayest my brave Feargus is sad—young fool—let him walk free too.”

“ That will I gladly.”

“ Nay, not so fast, thou saucy dog—he is strong, none stronger, a day or two will not hurt him. Set her free at once, if we free them together they will be for leave taking—no, let him stay where he now is till such time as I tell thee; but say to him that he may be of good heart, for he shall be speedily freed.”

“ That were a mockery, king, for of good heart will he never be since thou hast forbidden him the lady Torfrida.”

And so Torfrida was set free, but she lay for many days ere she could gain strength to walk. And Osbert went to the king, knowing that Torfrida was to be released, and offered to escort the

lady; for so had he plotted, thinking thus to get her into his own hands.

And Penda said that, as she was a king's daughter, he could do no less than send a king's son with her, for escort, and fifty men, and so it was settled.

When Feargus heard this he sent again to Penda, seeing Osbert's hand, and Duncan boldly told the king that Osbert wanted the lady Torfrida, and that he was the enemy of Feargus, and they would not trust her with him.

"Darest thou to speak thus against a king's son, and the wealthiest thane of my court, and make these charges."

"The Albanich care not for kings or thanes except their own, and them only obey; as to us, we swore to king Nechtan to do to the utmost for his son, and I tell thee, king Penda, that we will go with the lady too or else thou shalt shoot us all down."

"Surely thou advancest in boldness; the sooner thy chief cometh to lead thee the better, for, were I thy master, I would lead thee with a halter, and by the gods, wert thou the servant of any other man, thou shouldst now be dangling from the town wall."

“ King, thou hast imprisoned the noble Feargus, who loved thee and who hath fought for thee as none other hath, and fearful oath hast thou drawn from him; if thou now givest his lady into the hands of the villain Osbert, and destroyest his captain, his cup will be full.”

“ Thou mayest take thy men with Torfrida, and thyself—but hark ye, never again enter thou this hall; for surely nothing hath saved thee but the fact that thy chief loveth thee.”

CHAPTER V

THE PARTING OF FEARGUS AND TORFRIDA

THEN Duncan went swiftly to tell Feargus, and he was glad beyond measure that his men were to accompany Torfrida.

“ Now I need not tell ye, Duncan, to arm ye all with your best and take the fleetest horses, and if Osbert hath laid any trap, seize ye him instantly and, whoever else may escape, let not him. But if he hath with him fifty men, like yourself, ye need fear nothing, for he knoweth well his men who serve for money are no match for thine who serve for love. But all of this thou wottest of thyself: I have little need to tell thee.” So Duncan went forth on the day set for the journey and gathered his men, and Osbert brought his friends also.

Then Torfrida rode out on a horse litter, for she was weak still, and pale; and only two maidens rode with her. Seeing Duncan, she beckoned to him to ride beside her; then speak-

ing in Gaelic, which she was well able to do, her mother having been of the Pictish race, she said, "Duncan, my friend, leave me not to this man, nor let him ride beside or near me, for I loathe him. To him it is we owe the overthrowing of thy chief; do not trust him with thy safety, nor that of thy men; surely great number of warriors he bringeth."

And Osbert was for setting out on the moment, but Duncan stayed him while he counted his men, then, turning to Osbert, he said—

"The number of my men is but fifty, but thou hast with thee not less than fifty and twenty gentlemen; a halt we will call till my cousin, Alastair, hath fetched hither twenty men of ours."

Then said Osbert, "I come not here to parley with thee. I speak with thanes and princes, and all such as thou have but to obey: fall in, therefore, behind my men."

At this Alastair glowered and laid his hand upon his sword, but Duncan, who was of an easier temper, answered—

"Nay, we are all daoine-uasil¹ and of better blood than thine. Thou knowest well, prince, that such parleying as this will avail us nothing.

¹ Gentlemen.

If thou wishest seventy men, seventy let it be, since thy will is higher than that of Penda, who said we might take each of us fifty; but an thou takest seventy or any other number, then will I do likewise; but I must first report me to the king, lest my chief or myself get the blame for the breaking of his orders."

Then Osbert bit his lip and swore to be revenged on the Pict. So they took each fifty men, and Duncan ordered his company to arrange themselves round the person of Torfrida, he himself riding on one side of her with drawn sword and Alastair on the other, so they had Osbert and his men in front; but Osbert, seeing this, was angry and asked wherefore the Picts had arranged themselves to bring up the rear.

"Nay, prince, thou art the king's son, methought it fit and proper that thou shouldst ride in front, while I, who am but a captain and a chief's son, should ride in the rear with the prisoner, leastwise this is after the manner of the Albanich, and king Penda hath no bond from us that we are to live after the customs of the Mercians, but rather our own way. Such is my wish to please thee, however, that if ye like to order my men otherwise ye may do so—thou wilt

find them wondrous meek of manner and easy of persuasion."

Osbert knew this for irony, and answered, "So thou sayest, but, as I have no wish to pick a quarrel with the like of thee, I will allow this point; but I must tell thee, that it is proper the lady should ride with me, who am the chief of the party, and among my thanes, they being of her rank. Otherwise king Sigmund will say we have not shown respect to his daughter, and Penda hath said at all times that the lady Torfrida was to be treated gently and above the common, for he regardeth her greatly."

"As thou wishest, sir prince, but thou mayest have the ordering of this thing, for my men look upon the maiden as the lady of our chief, Feargus, and therefore their mistress, and the Picts, as ye call them, are ill to give up what is their own."

Finding all argument vain, Osbert said no more. So they set forth, and the Albanich, with Torfrida in their midst, turned along the road which led to the prison of Feargus, at which Osbert chafed. And Duncan, knowing that it would fetch Feargus to the window, ordered his men to sound their pipes, and so it happened as Duncan had foreseen, for Feargus hearing them,



Feargus thrust his body through the opening, and held Torfrida in his arms and kissed her, and she him.



came to watch them, pale and grief stricken, and beheld Torfrida as she rode between his captains, and she him. Then Duncan, though he knew that Penda had denied the parting, ordered his men to halt, but Osbert was for going forward.

“On my head then be it,” said Duncan, taking Torfrida’s horse by the bridle and leading it below his master’s window. Then Feargus fell to greeting, and cried, “My faithful Duncan, I wot well that of thyself thou hast done this thing.”

And Duncan made his men mount on to each others’ backs, and the topmost placed their shields together, and he stood upright in the saddle, Alastair doing likewise, and between them they lifted Torfrida from where she lay sick in the litter on to the shields, till she stood as high as the window of Feargus; then the men, and all they that stood about, cheered, but Osbert chafed and wanted on. Then Feargus seized the great bars that fenced the window, which only perhaps the mighty Duncan and Alastair, of all the mighty men who stood in that throng, could have as much as stirred, but such was the strength of him, and such his love, that the bars shook and bent, then parted asunder from the walls that

held them, and he thrust his body through the opening and held her in his arms and often kissed her and she him. But never a word he spake though she wept much, and cried, "Alack, never more shall I behold thee; never more shall we ride a hunting together in the wild wood; never will Torfrida fare with thee to the land of thy kin."

And fiercely she clung to his neck and wildly wept when they needs must part them. And, as they rode on, the tongue of Feargus was loosened, and lifting his voice he called aloud, "Torfrida! Torfrida!" and so called; and at first his voice was faint and hoarse, but at the last so mighty was the shout that the town rang with it. Till soon she, and they who rode with her, became but as a speck in the far distance, though still his eye seemed to see her through mist and dust, and still he called aloud her name that all the townsmen gathered beneath and thought him mad, and even the king sitting in his hall heard that wild shout and shuddered, and as he lay in his bed through the night it uprose, till the very winds seemed to catch the burthen and shriek "Torfrida!"

CHAPTER VI

THE FALL OF FEARGUS

WHEN those who had taken Torfrida into Lindesey to her father had returned, the king sent for Oscar and bade him release Feargus, and so he walked once more a free man; but free or fettered it made little difference to him at that time, for the parting with Torfrida, and the oath drawn from him, had well nigh broken his heart. And much he longed to pick a quarrel with Osbert and his cousin Edgar. Osbert himself was sullen, for that his plan had been thwarted by Duncan's cunning, and, moreover, he found himself of smaller count with the king. For Penda now showed much favour to Feargus, as if to atone to him somewhat; for the things which Duncan had said in his wrath had opened the king's eyes and he no longer so fully trusted Osbert. But the thane had a large following, as had his cousin, and was, moreover, a leader of great skill, being, after Feargus, the first captain of all his host, and the

king could not throw over so powerful an ally. So Penda and Feargus became friends as ever, but Duncan and his men never forgave the king for his treatment of their chief, though they kept their anger to themselves. At this time Penda went out once more against the Christians, and marched into East Anglia, and there slew its king, Anna, and laid its lands waste, giving its cities to the flames. In all this work Feargus had a hand, and he was grieved thereat.

It chanced when the Mercians had returned to their own land word came that Oswy, king of Northumbria, was arming, and that Sigmund and many another king had joined him. So Penda had hardly won home before he made ready to meet them, but, when they were marching forth, there came messengers in great haste, saying that the kings feared to attack him and had turned them back to seek their own lands. So the fame of Penda reached through all the breadth of the land, and his rule was felt even as far to the south as London.

So there was peace, and Feargus, finding his work done, dwelt more upon the memory of Torfrida, till one day as he was riding the desire to see her came so strongly upon him that for a

moment he wavered, and was for starting off there and then to seek her, but he minded him of his oath to Penda. And he wrung his hands in despair, and once more set aside the thought, but a great gloom sat still upon him so that he was no longer bright or merry, but walked ever like one in trouble. They were staying at that time at Nottingham, and one night he arose and donned his minstrel's garb and took down his harp, and said he—

“ Why should I, for promise wrung from me through my enemy when *she* lay near to death, not see her more, whom not to see is worse than death—oh, cruel promise! And what can Penda ask as forfeit should I break my oath—life? Why an he denies me love he may take it, for without Torfrida life were of little worth. Now shall I break that oath though all the world henceforth call me liar and traitor. Alas! I that never broke oath or promise—I who have served my master, and fought against Christ rather than desert my king and so break the oath I swore to him and my father. Alas! that I should have seen the day; it were better to die, and yet will I not die, so long as Torfrida lives, but will even now see her. Come, sword, thou wilt

carve a way to men's hearts, whether thy master be traitor or true."

So taking his claymore¹ in his hand he went out and found Duncan, trusting him with his secret, and Duncan said no word of dispraise, but smiled and said, "May the gods speed thee."

Then Feargus rode out into the night, and entered the forest of Sherwood and, keeping the line of the Trent water, rode northwards till he came to the castle of Newark; here finding a boat, he crossed the river and took his road eastwards, and no man asked him whither he went or whence he came, he being dressed in the garb of a minstrel. And right cunningly he could play when need was, for he loved the harp better than the sword. On he fared until he reached Lincoln or Lindum, wherein dwelt Torfrida. He entered in boldly at the great gate and took his way into the town, mounting the brae on which stood the castle of Sigmund. Walking round the castle walls, at length he found the great garden, and there he placed himself where he might see any that walked therein but might not himself be seen, for he wished that Torfrida should not know of his coming, thinking to content himself by the

¹ *Clead mhor*—great sword.

sight of her and depart. So shortly after the evening meal he saw one walking towards his hiding place: he knew it was Torfrida and his heart leapt. Then he arose among the bushes and saw that no person was with her, it being her custom to walk alone. Long time he stood there, and then the thought arose in him—why should he not speak with her? She seemed sad and heavy-eyed, and never again might he behold her. Then thoughts of his broken oath and dishonoured name held him back once more. Now she turned and gave a little sigh; now her gaze wandered towards the place where he stood, as if her soul knew that one she sighed for was there, though her mind knew it not. That look decided his wavering—how might he withstand those eloquent eyes! Softly he struck a few familiar chords; she started, paused; he continued the air softly, then stepped forth, and in a moment she had thrown herself into his arms, weeping wildly and too glad to speak. At length she said—

“Now hasten thee away, for if thou art seen the death of the spy will be thine, and none of thy good deeds shall save thee.”

“Is this all, Torfrida, thou hast to say to

one who hath thrown away even his troth and his worship for thee—naught but ‘Get thee hence’?”

“Nay, now, thou knowest that I would keep thee and never send thee hence; but I would see thee again, and this if any find thee here I am not like to do, and—there! thou shalt have a kiss for thy hardihood in coming. Nay, now, let me go; I kissed thee, but did not tell thee to kiss me. See, thou hast ruffled my hair which is only now new done. Stop, stop, thou hast taken kisses enough to last thee a twelvemonth!”

“Then thou wouldest rather that I took only such as would last me a shorter time that I may come again the sooner. O sly Torfrida! but that I may keep in with thee I swear that these I have taken shall last but twelve days, when thou shalt see me again.”

“Nay, let me beg of thee—if thou shouldst be discovered!”

“I can but die, and as well for Torfrida as for Penda.”

So Feargus departed and reached Penda's land, but in trembling and like a guilty man he went, for his heart lay heavy in him at the breaking of his oath, and he found Duncan waiting upon

him. And Duncan seeing his master downcast feared that he had fared ill and asked of him, "What aileth thee?"

"Then thou shunnest me not, Duncan, the breaker of oaths?"

"And what for should I shun thee: for breaking oath wrung from thee in such brutal wise!"

So Feargus was greatly cast down for many days, but on the tenth day he donned his minstrel's garb and went out and found Torfrida. Many times thereafter he went and greatly his coming troubled her, for she was afraid lest her father's men might take him, and often she begged him to leave her.

At that time Penda was staying at Tamworth, the capital of the kingdom of Mercia, and his men were making great preparations for war, for king Oswy of Northumbria had taken upon him the overlordship of East Anglia. So Penda shook his white locks fiercely for, though the winds of eighty winters had blown through them and for thirty years he had fought against the Christians and triumphed, yet his spirit was unabated and his strength great. King Oswy also gathered his men, with him going the East

Anglians and Lindiswaras, or Lindeseymen, with many others. And Torfrida was afraid for her father, for though they numbered a mighty host, yet little they thought of themselves as against king Penda.

CHAPTER VII

OF THE MEETING OF FEARGUS AND OSBERT

WHEN the host of Penda was ready, so splendid it looked that no man had ever seen its like. By the king on either hand rode a company of kings and princes of royal blood to the number of thirty. They were English of Mercia, king Cadwalla of the Gwynedd, the British of Mercia, Southumbria, East Anglia and the fens, and even from Oswy's own chiefly-Welsh kingdom of Northumbria; with Picts from Galloway and Lothian by the shores of Forth. It was a great and motley gathering of Christian and heathen, Angle and Kelt, and the king himself held the centre. Osbert was sent on before to gather in men whose dwellings lay by the way, and was to join the king at the Winwoed near Loidis or Leeds. Feargus longed to see Torfrida before the battle, for he knew that she was in her father's camp and by the help of her brother Edwy thought to get speech of her; so he sent a trusty messenger to Edwy, and when they came

by Nottingham he delayed and tarried behind, promising to meet the king seven days hence at the Winwood field. So the king departed, taking with him the more part of his host, being the right wing and centre. And Feargus went forth on his great roan steed—there being few that could carry his bulk—and he donned his minstrel's dress and entered the wood. After riding for four days he came near to where a great army was gathered, then tethering his beast to a tree he sat down. At the first glint of sunrise he heard the trampling of a horse through the dry leaves and Torfrida rode up hidden in the folds of a cloak of great size.

“At last, sweet one!” said he. “Dark it seemed while the mirk lay around, now thy presence maketh all the world bright.”

“Nay, now, this is but an ill time for fair speeches, brave Feargus; my heart is breaking with ill foreboding—nay, kisses cannot comfort me. Wilt spare my father, Feargus, and leave king Penda; hast thou no answer for me save a kiss?”

“So little value thou settest on my kisses, and yet the memory of the few thou gavest me, miser as thou art, is always with me.”

“I ask my father's life and thou profferest a

kiss; these thou canst give me in plenty, but thou canst not give me my father, Sigmund, when the arrows of king Penda have taken him once from me. A kiss for a life forsooth!"

"I would even now give my life for a kiss, Torfrida, but king Penda's I may not give. What stirreth yon boughs? See! it is not the wind, for there is but little, and hark, the sound of hoofs! Torfrida, we are betrayed."

"Oh, say not so. Fly, Feargus, they are my father's men; fly, they will slay thee!"

"Thy father's men or not, my red roan is little used to flying. Penda's men are only taught to go right forward."

"That shows how foolish men are; hide then thy sword that they may take thee for a peaceful minstrel, and I, thy lady."

And so, guiding their horses aside behind the boll of a great tree, they waited until two horsemen appeared; at sight of them Feargus started. "Torfrida," said he, "we are indeed lost—it is Osbert and Edgar; behind ride their men doubtless. Caught with the daughter of an enemy, sweetest, none will believe we are not plotting Penda's downfall, and Osbert will take heed that none *shall* believe."

"Alas! thou wert ever too ready to run great risk."

"Kiss me, Torfrida, for henceforth I shall be shorn of name and worship and the fellowship of brave men, and thou wilt no longer wish my company."

"Nay, speak not thus; it is for me that thou hast risked all things."

"What cheer, sir minstrel?" shouted the newcomers.

"And what ho! ha! a woman—thou sly dog; but surely thou art a stalwart fellow for a minstrel and great of limb; a better soldier thou wouldst make."

"A man wants but a strong arm to be a soldier; a minstrel needeth heart and mind."

"I see thou hast no stomach for the fight; th' art doubtless faint of soul."

"Not more faint neither than thou art thyself."

"Ha, ha! an insolent dog! Little of the minstrel is there in thee."

"Get thee hence on thy journey; men of my calling are not used to be treated as slaves or sword-bearers; but for all that thou hast great backing I am not adread of thee."

"Thou hast a saucy tongue, knave. Here,

lead thou his horse, and now, minstrel, strike thou a song, my men are weary, and if thou canst not play then shall ye lose your lady."

So Feargus struck his harp, knowing that it would be fatal to him if the news of his disobedience to his oath reached the king through Osbert. So they were mighty pleased with his playing, and all would have been well and the evil of all that day had never been, but Edgar, who was riding nearest, suddenly cried: "Thou art a cunning knave, thou minstrel; thy lady hath a graceful figure, surely she will be fair of face also." So saying he drew aside the veil that covered her face and Osbert cried out—

"Torfrida!"

But hardly had the hand of Edgar reached his side again before, with his master's touch, the great red beast of Feargus turned swiftly and the giant minstrel, seizing his harp in both his hands, struck Edgar with it so hard that the dead face of him was such that no man knew it for that of Edgar. And so fell the third captain of king Penda.

Then said Osbert in great rage, "Stay, bowmen, your hands; back, carls, *I* will deal, for he hath slain my kinsman."

Then the beast of Feargus swerved round again and faced the thane as he drew his sword.

"Nay," said Feargus; "enough bale hath been wrought already, Osbert, and I would that thou and thy rash kinsman, whom I have slain thus hastily in high blood, should be with me on the right hand and on the left of king Penda on the day of battle. Nay, I will not do further hurt to the cause of our king by the slaying of thee; but when his enemies are scattered we can settle this quarrel—for I am Feargus."

"Then have we here a traitor caught with the daughter of our enemy, Sigmund. Long hast thou deserved death, and now shalt thou have it, for thou hast shamed me by the slaying of my kinsman."

"No traitor am I, Osbert, to Penda, only in trysting with the lady Torfrida, else what need had I to meet my lady in the wood, and in secret, when in this guise I might have entered the very courts of king Sigmund."

"Defend thee, traitor," cried Osbert, fiercely drawing his brand.

"Nay, a tryst have you and I with king Penda by the waters of Aire. Thou wouldst right thine own wrongs at Penda's cost, but such am not I."

“Then a coward I brand thee, and a traitor, before these my men,” and so saying he smote Feargus with his sheathed sword.

“Now, thou fool,” said Feargus, “thou shalt have thy wish, for no other choice thou leavest me.”

And then the men fell back and cleared a space, and Osbert rushed upon his antagonist and plied his sword until the sweat poured down from the brows of the both of them, and yet Feargus forbore to strike, for sake of Penda, and when Osbert was aweary he said—

“Now for the king’s sake let us stop this hand-play, or of a surety we will be too late to tryst with him by the waters of Aire, for thou well knowest that the king will not wait if the enemy showeth himself, but, branding us both as traitors to him, will fall to the fighting.”

Osbert made no answer, but, being breathed, rushed again upon his foe, so angry was he to be shamed before Torfrida and so full of jealousy of Feargus. Long time they fought while the day wore on, and then Feargus saw that unless he slew the thane he would himself be slain, and all the men marvelled at his swordsmanship that could keep so renowned and fierce a sword-

player off so long, for neither of them had any hurt.

At length Feargus turned upon his foe and they met together with a great shock, and the helm of Osbert fell in sunder two ways and his shield fell another and his sword was bursted at the hilt and he staggered back as a ship starts that hath struck ground. And then Feargus turned aside, not wishing to slay him, though like a dead man he lay for many a month.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEAD HERO OF THE WINWIDFIELD

AFTER parting with Feargus and Osbert, Penda held on his way with all his thanes, and many English and Welsh and Picts and broken men came in to him as he fared northward. And they marched until they won the valley of the Aire at Woodlesford, where they crossed the water and held on towards the Winwidfield by the side of the little river Winwid, which runneth down till it joins the Wharfe at Towton. In the glen by the water they set their camp; above them stretched the wild Winmoor itself, beyond to the northward lay the great valley of the Wharfe, surrounded by many breezy uplands; southwards towards Woodlesford lay the Roman fortifications of Seacroft and the Roman road which cut in twain the wild moor that stretched to the Aire water. And so they gathered them in the glen by the Winwid burn to keep the winds off them, for it was the month of Novem-

ber, and that the enemy might not see their whereabouts. There they waited for seven days, till at length those who watched from the head of the moor came in, saying that they had seen men moving on the hills to the north-east. The day wore through and the next, and they saw many signs of the approach of the Northumbrian host, but, though they should now have kept their tryst with the king, there was yet no word of Feargus or Osbert. Then king Penda grew impatient, seeing that he might lose the advantage of the ground by waiting. Another day and doubts filled the old king's mind. Had his captains betrayed him? And his men were discouraged, for much they looked to Feargus and Osbert. That night a great storm burst upon the camp of Penda, and the heavens opened and poured down their waters in torrents and the lightning flashed fiercely across the sky and the thunder rolled down the valley, filling the minds of men with forebodings. And the Northumbrians saw from afar how the lightning played fiercely over their enemies, and took heart and were comforted. On the morrow the watchers came into the king saying that the Northumbrians were approaching up the northern slope

of the moor. Then the king said unto himself that he had been betrayed. "And yet," said he, "little did I think them traitors; for I love the youth Feargus as mine own son, and though I have whiles been against him, yet I believed he loved me, and held him too true to desert me."

At the hour of noon the Northumbrian host drew near and the king, seeing his old enemies before him, arose and gathered his men. Then the kings and royal princes that were with him, finding him bent on battle, and knowing well that the Northumbrians would not begin the attack, came to Penda saying—

"We would counsel thee, O king, to wait still until Feargus and Osbert shall reach us, for of a certainty they will come: here are we face to face with a host mightier than ours."

Then the king answered: "And hath not the host of Penda ofttimes conquered hosts twice as mighty as itself, led by greatest warriors of the world? Strength lieth not in numbers, nor in big warriors or little, but in the hearts and minds of men. And how think ye it would look for Penda to return back to Mercia without smiting her enemies? Then would Odin say, 'Our champion is fallen,' and ye would all and

all Northumbria would say, 'So, the old man is weak—age maketh him faint of heart and weary of war; he is no longer Penda; let us unite and slay him, for victory will be easy.' Nay, I swear by the gods to break the Northumbrians or be broken by them this day."

Then the Northumbrian king, seeing the Mercian host moving forward upon them, took counsel of his chiefs, and they sent out a party of horsemen with a flag of truce and many splendid gifts of gold and silver, and Penda called a halt till they won his camp. Then the thane who bore the white flag spoke: "King Oswy, and with him the kings of Lindesey and of the East Anglians and many princes, send greeting to king Penda, and bid me offer to him these gifts if he will withdraw his men to his own land; and they will enter into a bond with him to sheath their war-brands and turn them no more against Penda or his people."

"Go back," quoth the king, "and tell your masters that Penda recks not whether their brands be turned against him or not, for hitherto the turning of them hath hurt him little. That Penda doth not want king Oswy for friend; for the kings of the Northumbrians have never

yet kept troth with the Mercians, and will be content with nothing less than the ruin of Mercia and the overlordship of all the Midlands. Penda is master of East Anglia, and when her king bendeth his neck and leaveth the camp of Oswy, and Oswy taketh himself back and sendeth his sword to Penda and acknowledgeth him as overlord—until these things are done Penda will take no gifts, neither gold nor silver nor arms nor mercy, and will give nothing but the cold steel. For, mark you, the sword that conquered Oswald and Edwin and Cadwallon and Cynwulf and Cynegils and Sigmund hangs still upon my hip. And tell them, moreover, that as soon as ye have won back to them I will give my men the word to bare their war-brands and no further parleying will brook.”

And so they went back to their king, and Oswy said: “If the pagan will not accept our gifts let us offer them to him that will—the Lord our God.”

Then king Penda gave the order for his men to move forward, but they were much discouraged, lacking the two chiefs, and came not on with the old ardour. And the advanced wing of the Northumbrians stood to meet them, Oswy

himself in their midst, and the Mercians recoiled before their doughty strokes. Then Penda ordered the other wings of his host to come on, seeing the battle must be either lost or gained at that moment. Long time they fought, and now one side was borne back and now the other, and then at last, when Penda saw that the Mercian host gained not on their foes, he gathered together his horsemen and with them charged the Northumbrians. Again and again they threw themselves on their foes, but in vain; for the northern host had vantage of ground and fought with all the strength of despair, and they gan bear the Mercians slowly back. And now all the play was with the sword, for in such close grips the two hosts lay in that narrow glen that the bowmen had little room to ply their shafts. In vain Penda urged them on and rode along the lines himself, striking with the strength of youth when any withstood him. Still they gained upon them, until at length the Mercians, thoroughly discouraged by the absence of their chiefs and the numbers of their foes, turned and broke, nor hearkened to the voice of king or thane, but burst back and, casting away their arms, fled in a body southward, down the valley towards the

Aire water. And ever the Northumbrians followed, till at length they came to the water by Woodlesford, but the terrible storm of the night had caused a great spate, so that the waters of Aire had overflowed the banks and covered the low-lying land on its border. And when the Mercians came to the head of the brae from which they could see the flood they knew not the stream, and being close together almost in order of battle—so well had the king instilled into them the habits of war—they dashed down the bank, which falleth suddenly towards the river, and plunged neck deep into the water. Now for a moment they are stemming the flood, all that great host, and many more are pressing on behind them, before the swords of their pursuers. Now the Northumbrians on the bank above see them stagger, for little they had reckoned the silent fury of that swirling flood; now they are hurled the one against the other, and wildly turn and try to win back and break and fall, and the water whirls over them. And now heads appear, and arms clasping others, which may be near, and shrieks for help and cries and curses rend the air, and the water is stirred but a little for all and sweeps on. And never a

man of that great host won the land. And their foes stood on the banks awe-stricken, forbearing to draw their bows, for it seemed to them as though the God of the Christians who commanded the new order had descended and himself smitten the invincible host of Penda.

And then they hied them back and coming on freshly fell upon the Mercians of Penda's army. But these were not among the flying; like a rock they stood on a knowe a mile above the Aire water, whence they had retreated in an attempt to rally their comrades. In the midst of them stood the king, a king indeed; tall of stature and erect and of wonderful beauty of countenance; deep and broad of chest, with white beard falling to his waist. On his helm he wore the raven's wings—the sign of Odin, as the cross was of Christ, for the king was of his kin direct, and for thirty years he had fought Odin's battle. Behind him waved the banner of the kingdom which he had raised from its utter littleness to be the greatest and strongest of the English, and around him were gathered all the flower of the Mercian host, princes and thanes, and the whole of the Albanich. And Penda had gathered all these men together into a great ring, and the

Northumbrians charged them again and again, but ever fell back, broken and beaten, and ever above the throng arose the shout of "Penda! Penda!" "Albanich! Albanich!" and only the best men of Northumbria dare king Oswy send against those cries. Shock after shock broke on them, but still the men of Oswy recoiled, leaving behind horses and riders with broken skulls and bloody faces. And it seemed as though that ring of men, calm and steady and without fear, were to win the field after all. Then Oswy bethought him, seeing that no men in his host could shake the grim company, and he called his archers in and planted them amidst the broom and bushes on either side, and bade them send forth their shafts. And so the ring grew smaller, and as one fell another took his place, then the king turned.

"Now," said he, "cometh death, and I shall die in the best company that ever I was in, for never men fought better than have ye, English or Welshmen, and ye Albanich, but it little likes me to be caught thus in a trap, a target for unseen foes, our bowmen having fled. Penda liketh to hear the ring of his blows on the helmets of Northumbrians; let this be his death song,

therefore. Few though we be, let us charge the host of king Oswy and die dealing death."

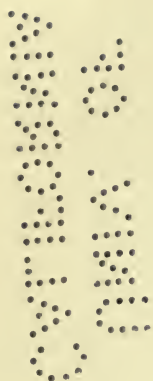
A mighty cheer from the thanes and Picts was the answer to this, and with the cheer they ran, keeping well their ring, with the king amidst of them. And they slew the bowmen, and then, turning, charged towards where king Oswy stood among his thanes by the burn side. The first inclination of the Northumbrians on hearing the war cry of Penda was to flee, so adread were they of him, but Oswy called to them—

"See," said he, "how the heathen host waneth! Little have ye in your thousands to fear! A handful cometh now against you! The enemy of the Christian and of Northumbria is in the midst of them! Now can he not escape! On, on and at them!"

And then the great host came against the little and in a moment the Mercians were borne back by the mere weight of the mighty throng in front of them, borne back till they came again to the knowe above the Aire water, but borne back in order and unbroken, compact and fierce, to deal death strokes yet to many a Northumbrian. Then they took their stand firmly on the knowe, and their foes came round on all sides of them,



"Now," said Penda, "cometh death, and I shall die in the best company that ever I was in."



and blows were struck hard and deep by Northumbrians, and the replies came quick and strong from Mercian and Welshman and Pict, each blow dealing death, and all the knowe was bloody; a wall of dead lay around the ring and still the old king fought with the best, but ever that ring grew smaller as the Northumbrian thanes came on afresh when others fell. And ever the brands clashed and rang and the crowd of common soldiers below looked on in awe at the grim and bloody work they wrought; for a fight of giants like to this had never yet been seen. But on the strongest weariness falls at last, and as the gloaming came drearily upon the fields they of Mercia were but a handful, and these stoitered like drunk men and were hardly enough to form a ring, till at length only one stood upright and the king had fallen.

“Feargus! Feargus! thou hast not forsaken us: ill hath befallen thee. Hadst thou been with us the last Northumbrian would long have fled the field. The king is down and thy work is done, Duncan, though would that the hills of Alban were around thee!” and so raising his cry, “Albanich! Albanich!” the last of the Mercian host staggered to the earth.

CHAPTER IX

OF THE FATE OF FEARGUS

WHEN Osbert fell, Feargus told his men to lift him and carry him with them, and they marched on, Feargus at their head. And Torfrida rode by his side, for the day was too far spent for her to reach her father's camp; but Feargus sent a messenger saying that Torfrida should be delivered up to her brother Edwy at the place of battle. And so they marched on through the night, making all haste. But few words did the lovers speak together, for the heart of Feargus was torn by a horrid dread and great grief, for he saw that he must lose all his worship in the sight of Penda. And soon they drew nigh to the spot where three days since they were to have joined the king, but no sound of battle fell on their ears, though as they came nearer, through the mist of early morning, they espied the place where were the tents of the Northumbrians by the field of battle. And then the Lindeseymen,

who lay towards the south nearest the point from which Feargus came, saw his men, and at first they took them to be another army come against them, and arose and stood to their arms. Then Sigmund spoke with king Oswy, telling him of the love that was between Feargus and his daughter, and king Oswy agreed to send young Edwy to bring in Torfrida and to offer fair terms to Feargus and Osbert if they would join the Northumbrian host.

“For,” said Oswy, “two such captains are not in all Britain, and pity it were to fight with them and their host, which numbers but as a third of ours. Tell them that Penda is fallen and that I will give to both the Pict and young Osbert lands and money and men if they will join with me. So, Edwy Sigmundsson, take thou this my message.”

Then Edwy went forth and Feargus rode also to meet him, with Torfrida, for there was great friendship between the three.

“I have sad news for thee, noble Feargus—Penda is down and all his princes, and thine own Duncan and all thy men. To the north of yonder knowe they lie, with the nobler part of the host of Penda, but the more part of that host the

waters of Aire have swallowed up. And Oswy bids me say that if thy men will lay down their arms and join him, they being greatly outnumbered, he will give thee lands and gold and men."

"Go back, gentle Edwy, and tell king Oswy that Feargus, whom cruel fate and, alack! his own folly have thus overthrown, is faithful to Penda, and that Penda's deathbed shall be his. Gold hath no lustre to him, and his only laying down of arms will be when the last of his host or that of Oswy lies down death-stricken, and Penda is avenged."

"Nay, I am loth to take such a message. Hath not enough blood flowed, and Torfrida—see how pale she hath grown."

"Never shall Torfrida wed with one who hath disgraced his name and herded with the foes of his king; my doings call for death. Penda hath died believing me false, and him will I hasten after that he may know me aright."

"Nay, say not so—and all these thy men?"

Then the young brothers of Osbert who were present stood forth, for they had talked much together, and they said—

"Lo! Edwy Sigmundsson, the Pict may do as

he listeth, but we are not of his host nor are these, our brother's men. We bid thee tell king Oswy that we will join him on troth given." So Edwy gave them his word, and they and all the host of Osbert went with him. Then did Feargus turn his beast and without further word spoken strike spurs; but Edwy caught his bridle and begged him that he would stay for Torfrida's sake, and Torfrida wept. And when the two of them looked upon Feargus they knew that he was beside himself; and suddenly then he shook Edwy's hand from his arm, causing his beast to leap aside, and quickly fled. Edwy saw that Torfrida could ride no further, and he stayed beside her, crying to his thanes—

"Haste, for the prince hath taken leave of his senses. Haste, and by no means let him slay himself, and be ye not adread of him, riding without arms, for such is he that rather would he be taken than strike ye."

But Feargus was already far ahead of them, and he fled toward the knowe above the Aire water where the battle had swayed and waxed the fiercest. Now he reached the spot where the dead lay thickest—kings and princes and thanes, many of them Christians long since, but

held together by the power and the splendour and the faithfulness of Penda. There, heaped up ring within ring they lay, true men to their lord—Angle and Saxon, Pict and Briton, with men from Lindesey and men from Trent and men from the flat country of East Anglia—all dead, with Northumbrians intermingled—dead—dead! And there, within the last ring, lying all alone in a cleared space, as though even the dying had dread of him, and crept apart in their very death agony, to leave him as he had lived, without peer, lay Penda; his white hair of eighty years bedabbled with blood, blood on his breast and beard, blood on his sword, and blood on his broken byrny—dead, the unconquerable death-dealer! Nighest to him lay Duncan, and around were Picts and princes together in the last circle. Then Feargus knelt and drew his father's sword and laid it upon Duncan's breast. "For thou, brave Duncan, art more fit to carry my father's sword with thee among the dead than am I, and I will die with thy soldiers' brand in my palm." And then he knelt down by the king and kissed his brow.

"Not long shall it be, O king, ere thou wottest that Feargus, though he hath failed thee, is yet

faithful," and so he took his sword and made to fall thereon, but as he raised his head he saw the thanes of Edwy riding in haste and without arms towards him. Then he sprang to his horse and fled and they close behind him. And now he wins the brae that hides the waters from sight at that point, and now he disappears behind it, and now they reach the hill but little in rear of him, for his beast was aweary. And lo! there was Feargus on the brink of the black water, and now he has plunged into the flood and the creature he rides seeks to win the side and shrieks out for very fear; but Feargus steers him amidstream, and now he pants and staggers. And the prince threw his arms aloft, and waving his brand cried, "Torfrida! Torfrida!"

And the great red beast went down and the rider with him. And so swift ran the flood that half a mile soon lay between the sought and his seekers, and the bend of the river hid the rest. Seeing this the thanes turned back to carry the news to Edwy. And when they reached him they found he was bending over the body of one of the Picts who seemed to be still breathing, for he had great regard for his mother's kin.

"Where is Feargus?" said Edwy, looking up.

“ Alas! he hath thrown himself into the water of Aire and is drowned.”

“ Then right heavy am I and sad indeed will the lady Torfrida be, for to me he was ever as a kinsman and to her, alas! such store she set by him as never woman by man before, for surely he was the noblest man and the greatest swordsmith in all the land. And so was his heart set upon Torfrida that he knew not himself how much; and such was his love and his faith to his chief that 'twixt love and grief for tryst unkept he was beside himself.”

And when they told the lady Torfrida she fell down in a swoon and lay sick unto death for many a day, and ever in her sickness called upon her lover nigh to the breaking of the hearts of those that watched.

CHAPTER X

OF THE WOODSMAN OF SHERWOOD

So the waters that drowned the Mercians had Feargus, and in a moment whirled him out of the sight of the thanes of Edwy, and he was carried down the stream till all the breath was out of him, for no stroke to save himself made he. And all that day men from the country around had been gathered on the banks of the river and had garnered a rich harvest in gold and arms from the dead corpses of the Mercians won from the water. And when the body of Feargus floated past, the sun glowed on its golden byrny ¹ and they saw that it was kinglier clad than any that had come to their hands, so they set about to win it from the flood, and with branches of trees drew it ashore and there stripped it of its buckler and byrny, and to get the clothing from it they turned it about first on its back and then on its face and there left it. So lying

¹ A breastplate.

on its face it chanced that the mouth fell open and all the water ran out from it, and there it lay all the night, and the sweet air filled it in place of the water, and by reason of the great strength that was in him the heart of Feargus rallied, and the warrior turned himself on to his back and groaned and murmured. And he lay there for two days and two nights and then rose upon his arm, for the breath of the were wolf wakened him, and he seized the beast rudely by the throat so that it yelled and fled. Then Feargus stood upon his feet, but the past had gone from him, and he knew not to-day from yesterday or to-morrow, each being alike empty, and only the sense of a great evil hung upon him so that his brow was ever knotted. Then he felt weak for hunger and sought out of habit for his sword, but it had gone: they had taken all from him save the plaid which hung in folds around his middle and was then wound round his body. So he drew near to a stout oak sapling which had been thrown ashore by the water, and rent the branches from it, leaving himself a club tough and strong and of such weight that few men could have wielded it. With this he lay among the bushes till a red deer came past, then he

leapt to his feet and felled it at a blow. And he kindled a fire and cooked and ate of it and drank of a burn and was refreshed. Next he set about to make himself a mighty bow of willow, strung with sinews of the deer, and he hardened arrows in his fire, setting flints in the points of them and in like manner made himself a spear, but no sword had he. In the forest he stayed for many a month, but never could bide two nights in the one place, for the fever of unrest that was upon him kept him ever awandering. All through the day he sat upon fallen trees or down by the gowans on the wayside with his head sunk upon his breast and the water coursing down his cheeks, yet knew not what it was that made him greet. And in the night he would wander the forest through, or bathe his fevered limbs in dark streams; and when hunger fell on him he followed the chase, and so swift of foot he grew and so strong of his hands that the wild boar, the wolf, and deer found him a dreich blow-dealer. So it chanced that soon there was little in him that was like to the Feargus of the lady Torfrida, richly clad and gay and strong. His red hair hung to his waist and his beard fell down an ell before him and wild and trackless as

the wilderness through which he strayed. His plaid was ragged and faded, and his skin of the colour of the ripened grain. Shelter he never knew, but such was his hardihood that he lay out in the wind and rain, through winter and summer alike without scath.

CHAPTER XI

OF OSBERT AND TORFRIDA

FROM the field of Winwid Osbert was taken by Sigmund to his hall at Lindum, and when the wounds that Feargus had given to him were healed, he made a great friendship with king Sigmund and became his man, for he thought with the king's aid so to work that he might win Torfrida. The lands of Sigmund marched with those of Osbert, and by compassing the death of the youth Edwy and wedding Torfrida, he could join the two lands and be a great ruler. And Sigmund having so famous a captain to do his bidding, with all his warriors, waxed strong. And finding that his son Edwy set his face against any friendship with Osbert and was, moreover, not of a mind to make war—for war he hated—Sigmund found little pleasure in the boy and gave all his counsel to Osbert. Much Osbert sought the company of Torfrida, and though she would have kept aloof, she knew that

her father wished her to wed him and dare not thwart him openly. So he ran daily to do her bidding and many services he rendered, thinking to put her in his debt, but she treated him ill until her father seeing, spoke.

"Thy father wills that thou shouldst marry the prince Osbert who is a great and comely man, and such as the daughter of the proudest king might wed with."

Then Torfrida said: "Never will I, who have been betrothed to the noblest warrior of all this land, wed such as Osbert, who was ever his enemy and brought ruin upon both him and me."

Then Sigmund was angry and many bitter words were between them, and Torfrida wept; but the king put her from him and showed his anger in many ways until the life of Torfrida became a burden to her. Then, through the counsel of Osbert, Edwy was sent away across the seas and had no choice but to go; so she had no counsellor, and every hand seemed against her. And Osbert only had soft words and was quick to serve her, and so at length, as the dropping of water weareth a stone, she began to give way, for little she recked what befell her. And she was so full of heaviness that she found

relief even in the presence of the enemy of Feargus, for her father willed that no other person should have speech of her. And so when she rode out Osbert rode with her, and though she treated him with scant courtesy he still endured. On a day it chanced that they were riding by the outskirts of the town of Nottingham, where they were then staying, when Torfrida saw a group of youths gathered round some object which they hardly wotted whether to call man or beast, so huge and hairy was it.

“ See,” said she, “ what have we here—what manner of beast is this? Mercy, it is a man! ”

“ What else is there that hath shape like to that of man? ”

“ Nay, but never saw I man like this one. Of a surety, prince, he must be mad—but see, these lads will kill him.”

“ Tut! the killing of him will be little loss; but ha! ha! ha! he seemeth well able to ward himself. Surely he is a giant.”

“ Prince, I had a mother that was ever kind and loved her kin, sure am I that that man is of her race by what chance soever he hath come here. Now, I beg thee, if thou wilt do a lady service, save him; dost thou not see he weareth

the plaid of an Albanich — but quick, they stone him—ha! what a lion he looks! Faith, he is almost comely despite his madness! How well he holdeth himself! Hasten, good Osbert!”

“ Good Osbert! the lady flattereth; these ears are little used to words of grace from their lady’s lips.”

“ Go, go, I beg thee.”

“ Nay, most maidens would be afraid of such a monster.”

“ I tell thee my mother came from the Picts or Albanich as they call themselves, that dwell in the mountains of Galloway. I quail not at my kin, but thou seemest to quail, so long thou tarriest. Oh, had I but my gentle Edwy here to do my bidding!”

“ Nay, now will I go,” said Osbert, drawing his sword.

“ Put up thy sword then else will he think thou art come against him.”

“ I go not against a stranger unsworded,” and so he went forward, little liking the task. And then the wild man looked up and seeing a warrior, all armed, riding forth, thought that he came against him. Nothing loth, he burst out from among the boys and sprang upon his supposed

new foe. Seizing the horse by the bridle he forced it back upon its haunches, and with his long staff struck its rider to the earth. For a while Osbert lay without movement on the grass, such a dunt had he gotten. Then, seeing that he was a great thane, some of the youths ran forward and lifted him, and he started to his feet, and his anger and shame were great, and no sooner was he afoot than he ran at the stranger, sword in hand, though the wild man held but a staff, which Osbert judged to be his only weapon. Not so, however, Torfrida, who had taken note of the spear and bow of great length which he carried at his back half hidden in the folds of his ragged plaid. So when the thane turned fiercely upon the wild man she thought of her mother and of Feargus and his clansmen, who had done so much for her, and her heart was full of pity for him, and again she appealed to Osbert to spare him. Then seeing he did not heed, she rode forward, and speaking in the Pictish tongue said: "Draw thy spear, brave stranger, and defend thee, for a great swordsman hast thou now to deal with, but shed not his blood, I charge thee, for thine own sake; and if thou dost as I tell thee, I will befriend thee and no hurt shalt thou get."

The man started aback on hearing his own speech, and his strength seemed to fail him. Wildly and long he gazed upon her, and his spear shook as he made to draw it forth, and his knees quaked and rocked beneath him; then he leant upon his staff as one like to fall. But on came Osbert, now mounted upon his horse. Then as suddenly the stranger grew tall again, and too late to draw forth his spear, quickly caught Osbert's blow on his staff, and such was the force of it, that it was cut in twain. Then, sure of victory, Osbert aimed his blows, but with wondrous skill and quickness the stranger caught them on the broken staff.

Then Torfrida cried out: "Oh, coward, faint of heart, to attack staff with steel! Shame be upon thee!" and turning to the stranger she cast her own small sword, which she used for killing game, at his feet, saying in the Gaelic: "Take thou this; though it be but a maiden's, much may such as thou seemest do with it."

Then the wild man, striking up the sword of Osbert once again, brought his broken staff down upon the head of his beast with such strength that it reeled and fell over on to the ground. But lightly the horseman sprang down while his

antagonist stooped and lifted Torfrida's sword. Then put they their steel together, and the thane was still sure of the victory, though greatly he marvelled at the wild man's length of limb and largeness of muscle. And foot to foot they went, and many a pass and downstroke did Osbert try, but in vain; ever the wild man with his small sword was before him, and ever wearier Osbert grew, whiles the stranger waxed stronger, beating down his guard. And all the youths and Torfrida marvelled at such a wondrous swordsmith. At length he sent the brand of Osbert from his hand with a quick turn, and utterly abashed before the lady's eyes, the thane stood defenceless.

Then said Torfrida to him: "Badly hast thou fared by attempting the life of a madman. Of great quickness in swordsmanship truly art thou, and well hast thou granted the favour I asked, of this poor creature's life—I wotting not at that time how little it would be risked in combat with thee. Nay, he might well have overcome thee with the broken staff as he meant to do."

Then Feargus took Osbert's sword and her own and offered them to Torfrida. And she said: "Nay, keep thou the thane's sword, thou hast fairly won it, and it is well wrought and will

serve thee; and I see thou knowest how to be gentle with women and hast obeyed me, and I owe thee thanks for sparing the life of this braggart. Thou shalt not lack a friend or any that weareth the plaid while I can help. Follow me an' thou wilt, gentle Pict."

Willingly he obeyed, and the lines on his brow grew deep and his face became as that of one who laboureth with some great thought, and like a dog he followed, with his head sunk on his breast, but never a word had he spoken. And so he followed her thereafter in all her outgoings, and at night lay on the threshold. And he walked always with troubled brow, looking neither to the right hand nor the left, nor heeded nor obeyed any person, not even the king, except Torfrida. And when she was present he gazed only upon her, from beneath his matted locks, and when she was away his eyes were ever downcast and his feet knew no rest.

CHAPTER XII

THE OUTLAWS OF SHERWOOD

AND so the wild man was allowed to stay about the court of Sigmund, though Osbert tried hard to get him away, and even set two of his own men to slay him; but the stranger broke the skull of one and the leg of the other and himself escaped without scath. Now one day it chanced that the ladies of the court were out hunting in the forest of Sherwood, which came down near to the town of Nottingham where they were staying, and they had no escort save one or two pages and the stranger, who being able to keep pace with a horse, so fleet was he, followed the party. The day was bright and warm and the sun shone down through the branches and made all the forest gay with its splendour. And so they rode on deeper into the wood than was their wont, and they scattered themselves through a glade where, the branches interlacing overhead, the earth was streaked with soft sun and shadow. Then Torfrida stayed her palfrey

—gold caparisoned and round of limb—and it and its mistress sitting motionless, lost in reverie, were so full of sweetness that a fairy vision come hither on a sunbeam they seemed. But so merry were the others that none saw the four rough men who lurked in the thicket close by. They were not of a mind and one said—

“Nay, now, if we touch her ill will befall us, for either angel or elf-wife is she.”

Then one who was the leader of them replied: “Ye foolish fellows, neither elf nor angel is she—let not the woman bewitch thee with her brightness, a rich booty she will be, for she is not less than king’s daughter.”

He stepped forth and the others followed him. Then the maids screamed and the pages ran into the thicket, for their mistress was in the hands of the outlaws of Sherwood, whose deeds were ruthless.

“What want ye?” said Torfrida, steadily, but turning pale as she spoke.

“My lady must away with us, and thy father must pay us ransom.”

“I am the daughter of King Sigmund and heavy hands will he lay on thee if ill befall us. Thou mayst not hinder us.”

“That may and will we,” said the leader. “Whatsoever king thy father be, I am king of Sherwood,” and he placed a hand on her bridle.

All this the wild man had seen as he lay in a bush hard by, armed with Osbert’s sword of finest steel, but when the robber chief laid hand on Torfrida’s bridle he quickly uprose, and bounding to the side of the robber clove him to the chin. One of the others then lifted his horn to call his companions, but the wild man dashed the horn from his hand and crushed it underfoot, and then suddenly stooping, seized him by the middle and hurled him strongly from him, so that he lighted on his head and broke his neck and lay dead before them. The other twain, in sore affright at so sudden an onslaught and so mighty a foe, turned to flee, but quicker than thought was the sword of the wild man to bite the brain of the third robber, and so strongly he smote him that his body was clove in twain by the stroke, and so fleet of foot and long of stride was the giant that he that remained had got but a score yards before his foe was upon him and with a kick of the foot broke he his back. So there was none left to call their companions, and Feargus returned to Torfrida, and

the pages came back also in great wonder, and the ladies opened their eyes wide to see what manner of man it was that had come among them, who could scatter their enemies in so brief a space.

“Great indeed is the pity and the loss,” said they, “that so mighty and true a man should have so little wit. Surely much sorrow hath made him mad. A king’s son at least will he be.” They rode homeward safely, followed at running speed by their mad man. Then they went to tell the king how he had slain four outlaws in the forest and saved Torfrida and her maidens. So the king sent for the wild man, but he would not go until only Torfrida bade him, when he followed and stood before the king; but he saw none, nor heard nor heeded any, save only Torfrida, and on her his gaze was ever fixed. When they saw this some of the maidens wept for very pity and sorrow, and they all praised him, admiring his savage strength. And no person had heard him speak or looked into his eyes, not even Torfrida, for when she looked at him, so heavily hung his brow in great knots under his matted hair that his eyes were hid. So the king thanked him, and Torfrida put his thanks into the Gaelic that the

wild man might understand. And when she left the hall for her own bower he followed, and instead of sitting at the door she bade him enter, and then made her maidens bring water and a comb and shears. Then taking the towel she told him to kneel, saying in Gaelic: "A mighty man of thy hands art thou; surely never saw I mightier—save Penda or —; and if thou wilt, thou shalt stay and be my watch-hound for as long as I live, for right valiant and gentle withal hast thou shown thyself."

And he remained kneeling as she had commanded, while she stood before him, and she placed her hand upon his head and pushed back the matted locks. Even as she touched him the great man wept, and she combed and cut the locks, and washed with her own white hands his dust and sun and blood-stained brow, while her maidens laughed and wondered; but ever she combed and cut and smoothed his hair and beard, which now, freed from their load of dust, shone out like dark gold, and ever the great drops fell from his eyes. Then suddenly she pushed back his forehead with her soft white palm and with the other hand plucked him by the beard, lifting his chin therewith, and thus at

length looked into the eyes of him. One deep long look she gave as their eyes met, and then she uttered a wild scream and fell back in a swoon. Her maidens ran forward to her, but still the wild man knelt there gazing upon her. As he looked his brow grew smooth, his face blanched, and his whole body shook as if palsied, while great drops stood upon his brow, and he breathed a mighty sigh that startled all who stood near, and then he arose and, lifting his great head erect, shook his locks, and in a voice that made the roof ring shouted, "Torfrida! Torfrida!"

Then he pushed them aside and knelt and lifted her, clasping her to him, and kissed her again and again, laying her head upon his breast. And his tears fell upon her like rain, till at length she awoke and looked and knew that it was indeed he whom she loved.

CHAPTER XIII

AWAKE!

LONG time they sat, though little they spoke; their hearts were too full for speech. And greatly the maidens wondered. At length Feargus arose, for the day was wearing late; then Torfrida stayed him again and gaily ran and brought a helm, bravely wrought with gold and precious stones in the rich interlaced patterns common amongst the Picts, and a sword and byrny of like richness she also brought. Then she bade Feargus kneel while she put the helm upon him, saying: "It is not seemly that so great a warrior should go uncovered. This helm hath sat on the brow of a chief of my mother's kinship, and long it hath lain aside, being too large for most men; but see, it fits thee like as though it had been wrought for thee."

And she put the byrny upon him and set the great two-handed sword hanging at his back. "There, no one will know thee; with thy helm

and byrny and sword of wondrous workmanship, thou lookest as thou wert wont in the old days." She kissed his brow and called him her warrior, and sent him forth. And all was lit up before him and he minded that which had happened in the past time. He saw King Penda and his host overwhelmed, and his fight with Osbert and all things else that had chanced since.

And he threw himself down in his old place, but Torfrida, hearing from her maidens that he still lay at the threshold of her hall, went out and begged him away, for fear lest Osbert or her father should know him. "Nay," said he, "any other thing that thou biddest must I do, thou maid of my heart, for no desire hast thou that is not better than I am, and no wrong can I do guided by thee, but ever rightly and wisely; but here, Torfrida, thou hast asked me to leave thee and that will I never. We have had long leave of one another already. And even if thou lovedst me not, and had not the love-light in thine eyes pierced the darkness my soul had fallen into since that day thou wottest of, I would not leave thee. Nay, Torfrida, neither Sigmund nor Osbert nor any other shall part us twain more."



CHAPTER XIV

THE MEETING IN THE FOREST

AFTER speaking with Feargus, Torfrida returned to her maidens, telling them to keep secret the knowledge that Feargus had appeared among them. On the morrow Osbert arose and, saddling his horse, took his way towards the king's hall, on the side where Torfrida sat in her bower among her maidens. As he drew near he saw an object lying across the threshold shining brightly. Now for many months he had seen the mad Pict lying across the gate in this wise, and had tried to persuade Torfrida to turn him away from her door; but she mistrusted Osbert, and her father dreaded him, and for his sake she had to hearken to him, but with an ever-increasing ill-will the more he pressed his suit. And Torfrida had felt that a kind of safety lay in the mad giant who came of her mother's race. So Osbert had got used to his

presence, but as he drew near the door he saw that this was surely no mad and ragged Pict that lay in the gate, but a shining warrior in a gold byrny richly wrought, fit for king's wear. As he stepped up the man stirred not. Then said Osbert: "Now, sir warrior of the scarlet locks, make way, for I would enter."

"For what wouldst thou enter—the lady doth not lack thee nor aught of thine?"

"Fool—where I am not, there am I lacked."

"Lacked truly, but not desired."

"Rude dog—let me pass."

"Nay, no man passes here without leave of the lady."

"Thou art beside thyself, but now I am minded that thou art him of the woods, that erst ran ragged like as never man was afore. But thou hast found thy tongue. What ho! ye maidens of the lady Torfrida, hither and move thy mad watch-dog, else will I do him a hurt."

Torfrida sitting within heard the cry, and minded her of Feargus, and ran out, and lo! there were the two men facing each other. Then said she sharply to Feargus in the Pictish tongue: "How foolish thou art and how rash! Seek ye

no quarrel lest ye bring ruin on the twain of us. If they find thee out who thou art, then thou art lost, and then will my death come also, for rather would I die with thee, foolish as thou art, than live a day with him."

So Feargus paused and stood aside at her bidding but sulkily, and Osbert stepped in.

"What hath brought about this change in thy watch-dog, or I might say watch-tower, so tall of stature is he?" said Osbert. "Of a surety 'tis a dangerous and unmannerly brute, and sorely did my hand itch to thrash him."

"Methought thou hadst given him enough of thrashing to last thee: as thou shouldst know the dog hath long teeth. And I warn thee that if but a hair of his beard be harmed I shall know that thy hand, or more like the hands of thy men, have been at the doing of it, and never again shalt thou sit aside the ingle in hall of mine. This much will I do for my mother's kin."

And so they parted, and Feargus lay still outside the door, and Torfrida feared for him, dreading the villainy of Osbert, for sore had he pressed his suit that day, and she had repelled him roughly, till he left her in anger. So when

her maidens slept she arose, and went and looked forth the window that stood near by the door, watching the watcher. And the night following she did the same. And she sent a messenger to her brother Edwy, who, back from foreign lands, was through the evil counsel of Osbert kept in a far-off town on the border of Sigmund's land, where little life stirred, and there were none to befriend him. And when the messenger gave him the summons he set forth to meet Torfrida in the Sherwood near to the hamlet of Mansfield.

And Torfrida arose early before the day broke and took horse, and with Feargus rode to meet her brother. But Osbert had set a spy to watch her, and he followed them clad in green from head to foot that he might hardly be told from the green leaves. And he lurked ever in their footsteps, but kept well covered, behind bush and bracken, for he well knew the sureness of the arrows which flew from the great bow of the Pict. He watched the two riding side by side, and Feargus he heard talking, now in English, now in Gaelic, as madman never talked before. Now their horses drew together, and the Pict put his arm around her, and so they rode. At length,

about noon, they reached a narrow glen where they drew up, and he lifted her aground and took her in his arms, kissing her and she him. Then they sat side by side on a fallen tree, holding sweet converse, until the spy heard the leaves rustle and up dashed young Edwy, his horse covered with foam. He drew up so suddenly that the beast went back upon its haunches. Quickly he sprang aground and threw his arms about the madman, and the two wept together for very gladness. And then they held counsel.

“And,” said Edwy, “noble brother and sister, I fear that much ill is before ye both, and before me and my father’s house, for in the nest is the gowk that will turn out the young sparrows should it be thwarted of its prey, which is thyself, sweet sister, a little, and the kingdom of the Lindiswaras more.”

“Sorely thou comfortest me, Edwy,” said Torfrida.

“It were better,” said Feargus, “that we three should fly together, to my own Alban, and come forth again with an army and slay this serpent who bendeth the old man to his will.”

“Nay,” said Torfrida, “greater need hath he

than ever of his daughter to comfort and his son to deliver him."

So they bade Edwy farewell, and departed. And the spy, though he had seen all, had no power to understand their words, for they spoke in the Gaelic tongue.

CHAPTER XV

OF THE VILLAINY OF OSBERT

So the spy returned to his master, and Osbert was mortally angered and perplexed at the news he brought him. Anon he went to the king, and said he: "Lo, king Sigmund, thy daughter hath taken up with a mad beggarman."

"What may thy meaning be, friend Osbert? 'Tis a strange way to speak of my daughter, for like to her there is not another in all the land."

"Neither more nor less than I have said is the truth, king. The same beggarman that hath been so long about thy court to-day rode with her into the forest, and when they were out of sight and hearing they held sweet converse together, and the man cast his arm about her and kissed her and she him. So they rode until they met a second man in the wood, and they three talked together in the Pictish tongue and

then parted, and the two entered thy hall not an hour since. And now the mad Pict or devil, or whatever he be, lieth outside her door and is like to kill any person that enters."

Then king Sigmund was an angry man and swore a great oath. "Had any other but thee told me this thing," said he, "I should have said he lied. Now will I summon Torfrida, and her mad squire shall die."

So the king's messenger sought Torfrida; lightly she stepped out and followed him. Feargus started also to his feet with his bow in his hand, and when they reached the gate of the king's chamber the warriors forbade him to enter, for Sigmund had asked for Torfrida alone. Without word spoken, Feargus drew forth his sword, and they deemed him still a madman and feared his wrath, so let him enter. When king Sigmund looked up he beheld his daughter, but beside her stood a stranger whom he knew not, great of stature and mighty of limb and exceeding mild, but withal fearless of countenance; and his cheeks were like red apples and as smooth from good health and sober living—unlike the puffed and bloated thanes of Sigmund's court, and his pale blue eyes glittered and shone as

clear as precious stones. On his breast was the byrny of a king worked with the rich ornaments and bright colours of the Picts, and a king's helm sat on his brow, while at his back hung a sword of giant length. And so noble and comely he looked withal that the king stared upon him, until recalled by the impatient Osbert.

“And who art thou, sir warrior, king or king's son, or whatsoever thou be? ”

“Hold, king Sigmund,” said Osbert, “didst thou ask the presence of this man, or didst thou not say that none but the lady Torfrida was to enter the hall, for none but she and I are concerned in this matter. I ask thee in the light of the promise thou wottest of, that thou gavest to me long since, for war service rendered, that thou sendest away this mad beggarman.”

“Beggarman he may be, yet saw I never beggarman like to this, and few men even of king's blood. Yet Sigmund regardeth promise given, so the stranger must hold himself outside.”

“King Sigmund, men say that thou regardest an oath sworn, and I have sworn never to leave the lady Torfrida, and I beg that thou wilt give me leave to stay before thee.”

"Sir, thou art young and comely and a stranger, and I would befriend thee and all such. Nay, I would that I had many as honest as thou seemest here at my court; but if thou hast sworn so foolish an oath thou wilt have to break it, for I have long promised the lady to my captain Osbert who standeth here, so get thee gone as thou art bidden."

"That thou mayst have promised for thine own part, sir king, but for the lady, she hath not yet promised to wed this thane. If I leave this hall without her it will be feet before, and there will be others that will pass out along with me in like manner."

"Now, good Osbert," said the king, "if this man is indeed the madman who came in with thee and Torfrida, it is ill parleying with him, and he must remain, for I little like to bring in the guards and make this matter public." Then turning to Torfrida, his brow darkening as he spoke, he said: "What is this that I hear of thee, Torfrida?"

"That can I not say till thou hast told me."

"Dost thou not know that they say of thee that thou wast seen riding in the forest with this

stranger, and that this beggar or madman or king's son put his arm about thee and kissed thee and thou him? Such disgrace was never on our house before. And they say that the two of ye rode on and met with another."

Then Torfrida turned pale and trembled, and then spoke: "Thou hast tried long to force the thane Osbert upon me; know, my father, that I have sworn to wed with this stranger and may surely ride with him."

Then the king started to his feet an angry man, and Osbert drew his sword and started up likewise.

"Ho! guards, seize this madman, and the madwoman also, and slay him. Guards! guards!" cried the king.

Then sprang Feargus to the door, against it placing his back, and drew forth his bow and fitted an arrow thereto.

"Hold, sir king," said he, "for an thy guards lay but a hand upon her thou shalt die; for know that a shot never missed I yet with this bow at such range, and the traitor thane shall die along of thee ere thy guards have crossed the hall. Hearken how they clamour at the door. For thine own sake bid them be still, for on that

door's strength, which they so sturdily assail, thy life hangs."

Then Torfrida cried out in terror and called on him to spare her father.

So the king was constrained to call out to them to hold off, and they desisted. Then Feargus stepped from the door towards the king, never doubting his word given, and returned his arrows to the sheath, but the word of Osbert he had not got, and ere he reached Torfrida's side Osbert had won the door, and, bursting it open, called aloud to his men. In a moment twenty stalwart fellows were at the back of him. Then Feargus, seeing himself outdone, started before Torfrida and drew his sword.

"Hark, thou traitor," said he, "an thou or thy warriors lay but a hand on the damsel, neither thou nor they shall leave this hall if but king Sigmund will grant me fair field and ye will meet me man after man. And even if Sigmund hath lost his soldiership, then may I call myself one that can raise a death pile in this hall, such as men will tell of in the days to come, even though the lady Torfrida and I lie sword-stricken atop of it. And not the last to bite the dust shalt thou be, O Osbert! Thrice have I spared

thee, but a fourth time thou shalt taste the sword's edge."

"And who art thou, braggart?"

"One whom thy villainy hath well nigh ruined. I am Feargus of Alban, escaped from drowning, and saved from mind-death by Torfrida."

As though a thunderbolt had fallen at their feet, or the sky opened ahead of them, looked Osbert and the king, and the warriors nigh let their weapons fall.

Then said Sigmund, "Now I see that thou art indeed him whom thou namest, despite thy beard; yet many of the thanes of the prince Edwy swore to having seen thy death in the flood."

"Yet was I plucked forth the water for value, methinks, of the harness I wore, and here am I. And I claim thy daughter Torfrida."

Then up started Osbert. "Hear me, king Sigmund. Thou hast promised the lady Torfrida to be my wife, and I will in no wise release thee from thy bond given; but an thou deniest it my men shall enter and slay all within, for they are many while thy men are scattered abroad, and the many will conquer, how strong soever this madman thinketh himself."

"The king hath promised the lady to thee, proud traitor; but it is the lady herself that hath made me the promise."

"Let the king speak," said Osbert.

King Sigmund was much troubled, for his regard went with Feargus, and he felt himself in the hands of Osbert and would be free; but he knew that war with Osbert was ruin to his kingdom and himself, for so had the thane thrown his toils about him that all the realm was filled with his men. Then said he: "Much as I have the weal of Feargus in my heart, it is certain that ye both may not have the damsel. That thou, Feargus, and Torfrida have long since sworn troth is nought to me, for a maiden's fate is in her father's giving, and moreover, if I had in any wise promised her to thee, which me-thinketh I never did, but always forbade, then still by law of old time among our people, by thy not coming to claim and have the damsel, thy right is forfeit. Therefore the thane Osbert, who hath wrought much for us with sword and with counsel given, must have the lady."

"Thou, Sigmund, hast called thyself a Christian, and hast endured many strokes for thy faith, yet thou wouldst sacrifice thine own

daughter against her will in worse wise than ever men were sacrificed to false gods by Druid or at the death of chiefs of thine own race in days past. The law of thy land is not the law of mine, for there the wives are taken into the counsel of the men and have nobler station, and I will not bide by thy law who belong not to thy land, but rather will I fall here."

"Nay, be not rash, good Feargus; little worship will there be in the slaying of warriors."

"Then let the thane give bond for his men and you also give bond for fair field to both, and let the twain of us find justice at the sword's point."

But Sigmund minded him of Osbert's brethren and kin, and feared worse might befall by Osbert's death than by his presence.

Then said Osbert: "Nay, the lady is mine without fighting by the king's own showing; if I may not take mine own in peace then will I bring my men and thou shalt bring thine, and he that wins the field shall have the lady."

Then said Sigmund: "Thou, Feargus, art an overmatch for any man I have yet seen, save it might be Penda in his youth, though he was of lesser stature, or thine own captain Duncan, and

little worship would be thine in the slaying of the thane in single fight."

"Three times hath my foot been upon his throat, yet I have spared him for Penda's and for thy sakes, for all he hath ever done hurt to me and mine, the like of which did to me no other man. Canst thou then wonder that my soul thirsteth for his blood? And I know that the world would be the better of his killing, for troth kept he never since breath he drew. So if he will not let me forth the hall with Torfrida, let his men fall to."

Thus saying, Feargus fitted an arrow to his bow and drew the string.

Then said Torfrida: "Now, king, and thou, Osbert, if ye have aught of good in ye spare these men's lives; for an ye should not, ye will stand in heavy need of them in some right battle ere the days of ye be over."

But Osbert was now wroth, and the more so that he saw his men had dread of him whom they deemed a madman; for they knew him to be the greatest swordsmith in all the land. And when Osbert shouted, "Now fall upon him!" unwillingly the captain stepped forward with his men. And Feargus, who knew him to be a



Feargus wrenched the sword from Osbert's hand
and struck him to the earth.



brave man erstwhile of the host of Penda, little liked to slay him, so, letting his bow drop, he suddenly gripped him by the middle and flung him at his follower, and the follower fell among the remainder of them, causing confusion, and so in the strife Feargus gained the side of Osbert by a mighty leap. Taking him unwares, he wrenched the sword from his hand and struck him to the earth, and laying a foot on his breast held his sword to his throat.

“Now,” said he, “if a man among ye move the thane shall die, and if you, king Sigmund, give not thine oath and the thane himself his oath that ye will leave the lady Torfrida and me unmolested till I list to depart from among ye Osbert shall die.”

After long pause the thane cried, “I swear.”

And the king swore and all the warriors were witness thereof. Then Torfrida passed out, and Feargus as he followed bent and picked up the sword of the captain of Osbert’s host and handed it to him saying: “Thou wert ever a true man. I little liked to have blows with thee or to put thee to shame, but no worship hast thou lost, for never man but had his better.” And Osbert’s sword he left lying so that the thane had to stoop

to lift it. And the captain was well pleased to be counted of so great worth by the captain of Penda.

So Torfrida went to her own hall and Feargus lay outside across the gate.

CHAPTER XVI

OF THE BURNING OF THE HALL OF EDMUND

FOR many months Feargus dwelt at the court of king Sigmund, and went wheresoever he listed about the city, and Sigmund was much puzzled as to how he might get out of so great a difficulty, for Osbert was ever at his side with complaints of Feargus and Torfrida. And so one night it chanced that Feargus sat late with Torfrida, for her maidens were singing songs and holding great merriment among themselves. When at last he went to lie down outside the gate as was his wont, he found an arrow sticking fast at the foot of the door where his body would have been had he left Torfrida earlier. The next day he told Torfrida of this, but no other person. And he saw that he must soon be flitting, yet wotted not how he might depart with Torfrida, for he knew she would not leave her father. So he lingered, and ever Osbert urged the king to rid himself of his troublesome guest

and let him take Torfrida to wife. But Sigmund would not hear of any breaking of the bond he had given to Feargus. When, after Feargus had found the arrow, Osbert came to talk with her, Torfrida denied him admittance altogether, and he went to Sigmund threatening him with war unless he would slay Feargus. Then heartily the old king wished that the two would settle their differences between them. So thereafter when he heard that Osbert was making a trap to catch his enemy, he took no heed. It chanced at this time that Sigmund called a great hunting in the forest, and Torfrida with Feargus and Osbert and many others attended. When night fell the party set their tents up in the forest and lit their fires and made merry. Some way apart from all the others was the tent of Torfrida, outside of which Feargus lay keeping guard. It was about the middle of the darkness that he found himself sitting up half awake, and behold, before him was a bear of huge size, and he saw that it was held on either side by a leash through which means it had been led to where he lay. No sooner did Feargus see the creature than he was wide awake, and, starting to his feet, seized his sword and thrust it down the beast's mouth,

then stepping aside stabbed it with his skene dhu and ran swiftly out among the trees, hoping to find some of his would-be assassins, but quickly and silently as he had acted, those who had driven the beast on had been more swift and had fled. On the morrow he told Torfrida and again asked her to fly with him, and she was much troubled lest between them they should slay him, but still she refused to leave her father.

“Now of a surety thy father hath a hand in this.”

“Nay, say not so; my father would not break oath with thee or any man; hath he not lost enough and fought enough for the truth?”

“I am certain, Torfrida, that thy father hath at least some knowledge of this thing, and unless thou wilt fly with me they will slay me by these unmanly means, and Osbert will wed thee first and overcome thy father and brother afterwards.”

“Nay, if I were to leave with thee then would the thane more surely slay the old man.”

Feergus then saw that her mind was set and said no more, but kept ever watchful, and let no man see that he had any fear or suspicion, but was open with all. And the thane Osbert waxed

more friendly than he had ever been, and even sought out Feargus and spoke of him to all men as the greatest warrior of Britain, and Feargus wondered why he was thus friendly, and grew weary with very watchfulness. And when a thane, one Edmund, professed great friendship for him Feargus was fain to believe him sincere and he even went to his hall with him to sup. So on a day Edmund was giving a feast, and, thrown off his guard by his good-fellowship, Feargus went with him and sat in his hall that lay in the fens below the city of Lindum where they were then staying. They had much jollity and most of them drank deep. Now Feargus drank little at all times, yet in the middle of the feast he was overcome by the little he had taken and fell beneath the board. Then, at a signal, the revellers arose and left the hall, but Feargus was unable to follow though he tried to raise himself, and fitted an arrow to his great bow lest any should attack him. When he saw the hall empty he could move neither hand nor foot, but fell asleep, and woke not till it was past midnight and the stars shone amidst black clouds without. He felt sore and stiff and sick, like as he had never been before, and he knew

not where he was, till he thought of Torfrida and looked around and saw that the hall was not hers, and he felt that the place was filled with smoke.

“Now,” said he, “is the reek of a hundred fires turned into this hall or whatever it be, and I am like to smother,” and then the noise of burning caught his ear and he knew that the place was on fire. Half stupid still, he arose to his feet and staggered across the floor to the table and found water, and drank, for his throat seemed all aglow like to a furnace. As best he might he went stoitrin across the hall and felt along the walls for the door, but when he came to it found that it was locked. Then he pushed against it with his shoulder, but it stood steadfast, and he sank down beside it and sat upon the ground, for his brain was not quick, and he could not think what to do to get forth. Again he arose and went round the hall and found at length a pole-axe; with this he tried to prise the door open, but in vain. Then, seeing the fire so quickly growing, he took the axe by the heft and began to hew at the stout oak. His strokes were at first feeble, but at length the work stirred the life in him and the blows soon fell

with regular stroke and grew in weight, so that the planks sent forth a shower of splinters and rent and parted till at length there was a great hole yawning in the middle of them. Then Feargus became aware that there were men outside, for a dozen burning faggots were shot in through the hole. At this he was wrath and remembered what had passed, seeing that he had been poisoned and betrayed. He fastened the buckles of his byrny, and, finding there were so many foes at the door, climbed up to one of the windows and looked forth, but the fire had now a hold on the more part of the hall, and only the hole in the door kept him from suffocation. Outside he saw men stationed around the burning building to prevent his escape, and the chiefs themselves standing around the door. Among them were Edmund and the brothers of Osbert, and they had heaped faggots up against the walls all round the building. He returned to the hall and, lifting the skins which lay as a covering on the seats, he wrapped them about his arms and legs and feet and body and, tying them securely, took a huge faggot which the thanes had cast into the hall, and went to the door and struck a few blows with the pole-axe. He then mounted

to the window on the side opposite to that on which the thanes stood, and sprang outside among the burning faggots. The skins kept his feet from scath, and it was but a moment before he had dashed through them, and, gripping the burning brand in the one hand and the axe in the other, he ran lightly round the corner of the building and, with fragments of burning wood sticking to his helm, and the hairy skins which covered him alight in many places, with a fierce cry burst like a demon of the fire upon his astonished foes. There were Osbert's brethren, Thorkill and Osric, standing with the traitor thane, Edmund, while two soldiers of the lowest class stood one on either side the doorway. As they turned to meet him Feargus thrust the red faggot into the face of his nearest foe, and struck the traitor Edmund to the earth with his axe. Osric and Thorkill then rushed upon him, but the one, Thorkill, was much hurt with the faggot thrust, and, calling out for his men, fell back into the fire, while Osric, not being able to reach Feargus, owing to the length of his weapon, in trying to avoid it was caught about the middle and wounded. Feargus paused to pluck the body of Thorkill from the fire and then dashed

headlong at the soldiers. These seeing one clad in skins and all afire coming to meet them, turned and fled.

“Alack!” said Feargus, as he freed himself from his hairy covering, “alack for so much slaughter. Gladly would I have spared thee, Thorkill, for methinks thou wert gentler than thy deeds, but he that herds with traitors must fare with them also.” And so saying he laid the two bodies and the wounded man side by side in a row for Osbert.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WAY TO ALBAN

FEARGUS took his way home with a heavy heart. "Of a surety they will yet compass my death," said he. "The king wots well of this thing, and it is unworthy of the Sigmund, who fought against Penda for Christ. Penda the heathen would have scorned such like traitorous work. Woe is me for the house of Sigmund, for ruin is before it, whether I be slain or not, and were I to kill the thane, as I have his brother, then would his kin come against us if they do not now, and without warriors I could do little." So he reached Torfrida's hall and lay under the lintel but slept not. And when Osbert, passing in the morning, saw the Pict still alive, terror seized him, and Feargus eyed him sternly and spoke.

"If thou wilt turn thy face eastward towards the fens to the hall of Edmund thy servant, thou wilt find the thane with two of thine own kin awaiting thee."

Then Osbert rode on northward up the brae that made the centre of the town, and as soon as he was out of sight of Feargus he looked and saw smoke issuing from the hall of Edmund. With sore misgivings he turned his beast eastward. When he reached Edmund's land he found a few blackened timbers standing, and those two lying on the green sward stark dead and the wounded beside them. That day Feargus went and told Torfrida of the trap that had been set for him, and her fear was great lest they should slay him, and he asked her again to fly, but yet she would not.

"Then, Torfrida, thou wilt come with me and take Edwy's counsel," and she was not unwilling. So they sent a messenger that day to Edwy, and the next they hied them together in the early morn and found him in the forest.

And when he knew of the burning of Edmund's hall, "Surely," he said, "my father hath a knowledge of this thing. He must be in his dotage, and in his old age is doing that which in his youth he would have scorned. It seemeth to me that ye must fly together, and the sooner the safer, for the thane will not long leave his kin unavenged."

“ Now, Torfrida, hearken ye to Edwy’s rede.”

Then she looked dark, and said she, “ If I fly my father will be slain and thou also, Edwy.”

“ And if thou stayest here then surely will Feargus be slain, and Osbert will wed thee.”

“ Nay, that will he never.”

“ Once wed, Sigmund and Edwy will not be long before they follow Feargus, and then Osbert’s hand will be uppermost in the land of the Lindiswaras; for Lindesey he will join on to the land of his fathers and the house of Sigmund will be no more.”

Then Torfrida wept.

“ Nay, do not weep, sister; if thou wilt fly with Feargus thou mayst have a good journey to the land of the Albanich, and Feargus will return again with his father’s men, and maybe our mother’s kin forbye, and they will come and smite the traitor.”

“ Nay, I cannot leave my father, for he hath but one daughter.”

“ Though he hath wronged me and driven me forth,” said Edwy, “ yet do I love him; but he hath broken oath with Feargus, and hath come to break that law which is held most sacred amongst soldiers.”

Much more did he say but to no purpose, and they departed for home, and Torfrida was sullen and would not speak more to Feargus that day, but wept all the way. Before they had parted Edwy took Feargus aside, and said he: "Farewell, and keep and mark well my counsel—thou must fly with my sister, and as she will not listen to our rede thou must take her without her will." And so on the ride homewards Feargus thought of the counsel Edwy had given.

Three nights afterwards, having got the Pictish tire-woman who waited upon Torfrida to keep her mistress up late, he arose at midnight, and taking four fleet horses and many other things, put an old cloak about his byrny and went and knocked softly at the gate. Then the tire-woman, who had been in the train of Torfrida's mother, opened the door and let him in, and he found Torfrida sitting in the hall in the firelight, and when she saw him she was angered.

"Now what bringeth thee here, thou tiresome fellow? Enough have I not seen of thee this day, that thou shouldst come in at midnight forsooth? Get thee hence or thou wilt have my name in the mouths of all the town's wives."

"Torfrida, there is no rest for me here, and

there is no gain to any by thy staying. Though the ways to Alban are long and full of dangers of beasts and robbers and tempests and cold and hunger and weariness, yet not more merciless or fierce are they than Osbert and thy father; for the danger of them is open and declared, but the king and his thane work ever in secret. My beasts are without; let us fly to-night."

"That will I never, and full often have I told thee so," said she. "Get thee gone, I tell thee."

"Speak not so unkindly, Torfrida."

"Then get thee gone."

"Thou canst not love me, Torfrida."

"Get thee hence."

"Nay, tell me thou lovest me."

"I have told thee."

"Nay, tell me again or I will think that thou hast changed, so harsh is thy speech."

"I love thee—when thou dost not worry me—there."

Then he went to her and kissed her brow, and taking a kerchief stepped to the back of her and suddenly bent forward; as he did so the old tire-woman came forth and caught her by the hands and held her, while Feargus took the end

of the kerchief and tied them that she could not speak, then tied her hands together. Then the tears fell from Torfrida's eyes and she sank into a seat and struggled to free herself.

"Nay, struggle not, lest thou hurt thyself, sweet Torfrida; for I swear to thee, an thou canst not trust me, that no ill shall befall thee, but to-night we will take the way to Alban. Nay, I cannot see thee struggle so; thou wilt break my heart. Here, tire-woman, an she struggles so, thou must tie her feet together else will she do herself a mischief."

And then he tried to kiss her, but she turned her head from him, till at length he caught her and kissed her brow and wept.

"Be not angry," said he, "and greet not, for great is my love for thee, and I swear again that harm shall not come near thee as long as my body hath life to be thy shield. And I swear ever to worship thee both with my body and my soul."

Then he kissed her again, for that he could not help himself, so had she bewitched him, and putting a great cloak about her he bid the tire-woman good-bye and taking Torfrida in his arms went out and mounted his horse, holding her

before him on the saddle, and they rode away. In his hand he held his great bow with an arrow fitted thereto, and as they descended the hill and reached the last gate of the city a spy of Osbert's started up and made to blow his horn to arouse the watch. Then the bow twanged, the arrow sped and the man fell, and Torfrida shuddered. All the night they rode away northward and in the early morning entered the woodlands. Then, escape being hopeless, Feargus untied the handkerchief from her mouth and freed her hands and lifted her on to her own horse, but she would not look at him but kept her head down and turned from him and wept. Then his heart smote him—what if he had offended her past forgiveness!

And she wept all that day, and neither ate nor drank. And all that week they rode on, though Torfrida would not ride aside of him, but kept aloof and sighed and wept anon. At length Feargus broke silence, and begged her to ride in front, for he wished that she might be ever in his eye though he gave reason to her that he might see if harm befell her. So she rode in front, and his soul was full with gazing on her, so great was her loveliness. And thereafter she found him so

merry therewith that she was angered the more at seeing him so content to ride without her. So she threw many hard sayings back to humble him; then the big man was almost like to weep, for the sight of her drew him one way and her high words drew him another, till the heart within him was nigh drawn asunder between the sweetness of her look and the sharpness of the words she spoke.

Then at length she said, "No longer will I ride in front of thee to be gazed upon in this wise," and she turned towards the rear.

Then said Feargus, "Nay, now, if I may not even see thee, I will die here where I stand."

"Thou mayst die when thou listeth, but the season is ill chosen for my comfort; it seems thou hast brought me here to desert me and leave me to the wolves—I would have fared better at the hands of Osbert or of —— but ride not over me I pray thee!" For Feargus had drawn near in his eagerness to hear the name she had on her lips; then he fell back and thought much of her words, and had great fear, so that at length he rode forward and cried, "Torfrida!" And she answered coldly, "And who asked thee to ride aside of me?"

“ Sweet Torfrida, ’twas but to ask thee the name of him whose name was now almost on thy lips.”

Then she tossed her head half-saucily, half-tearfully, and made no answer, but struck her beast so that he leapt a good two lengths ahead. So they rode on and one night took up their quarters at a woodman’s cottage, and after having eaten Feargus went out in the moonlight to look around and found the woodman, and soon learnt from him that they had yet gone but a little way, and were still within easy reach of the horsemen of Sigmund and Osbert. As he was returning he happened to look to the left of him and there among the trees caught sight of a party of men resting upon the ground. Then a feeling of hopelessness came upon him, his hands shook, his knees trembled, and he sat down perforce on a piece of fallen timber; when he had recovered himself he arose and crept near to where the party was camping, and saw that surely enough they were the men of Osbert. Then he hied him back to the woodman’s cottage and stripped off his trappings, helm and sword and byrny, and took them in his hands and bade the wife rouse Torfrida. And when she had arisen

she came out and eyed him coldly without speaking. Then said he to her in Gaelic—

“ Know, Torfrida, that I have been out into the forest, and there lighted upon a party of warriors of thy father and Osbert, who are doubtless seeking us.”

Then Torfrida's face turned pale as death, for seldom had she seen him look so sad.

“ And now, Torfrida, here is the noble sword thou gavest me and here my good bow which I cut from the forest trees in my days of darkness when I had broken my oath through trysting with thee and so brought ruin upon king Penda. Here too is my byrny that belonged to thy noble mother's kin and like to which there is none other.”

Then Torfrida's heart swelled and she said softly, “ What meanest thou? Put on thy byrny lest the foe come and have thee at advantage.”

“ Nay, never more will I wear byrny or wield brand: never had I pleasure in killing; unless some noble quarry were in sight the hunt had little to draw me. Take the sword and give it to him whom thou lovest, and send the woodman to the warriors of thy father and they will take thee to Sigmund, and thou canst leave me

or render me up that they may do as they list with me, and thou wilt return to Sigmund and wed him whose name was so lately on thy lips, for whom thou hast been weeping; for I little thought to part true lovers."

Then Torfrida gave a sharp cry like a wounded bird and threw her arms around his neck, and with tears and kisses nigh strangled him. And she knelt down to lift his byrny, but he would not suffer her so to do but raised her by the hand. She fastened the byrny about him and begged him to get the horses that they might depart. So his heart was filled with joy and gladness as they rode away, and ever after, among all their troubles, and though oft-times he blamed himself for bringing her into so many perils, yet did she never upbraid him but always helped, so far as she might, and was ever sweet and gentle.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW THEY LOST THEIR WAY IN THE GREENWOOD

AND so they saddled their beasts and sped through the forest ever thinking that the men of Sigmund were upon them, and when night fell still they rode on, until at length Torfrida was utterly weary and like to fall from her horse. This Feargus saw, though she complained not, so that he drew up and dismounted. Then he set about to make her a tent with bushes and sticks, over which he stretched the plaid he carried. And she lay down inside the tent and he fitted an arrow to his bow and stood outside hard by. At about the midnight he was startled by the bay-ing of a hound in the rear whence they had come. So he saddled the tired beasts, but judging their enemies to be yet a long way off, left Torfrida resting and went deeper into the forest till he came upon a sleeping stag which he slew, and cutting the skin therefrom fastened

pieces on to the feet of their horses, judging that the hounds were following the horses' track and not that of the deer. Then he went to Torfrida's tent and said, "Sorry am I to arouse thee; full well I know thou art weary, but arise I pray thee, for now have they brought hounds to track us and we must away."

She arose and came out and he lifted her into the saddle half asleep, and they went on, and in their rear could be heard the baying of dogs and movements of men and horses, and Torfrida was sore afraid and trembled. Then, further to hide the track of them, Feargus steered their way westward through the wood, till after many hours' riding they won the river Trent, and taking a grip of Torfrida's bridle he caused the beasts to plunge in and they swam strongly till they reached the shore. They entered there the forest of Sherwood, which was deeper than that through which they had come and full of swamps and devious ways and beasts and robbers. Little he liked to enter it, and he wrapped the cloak close around Torfrida as though she were a youth and put a man's bonnet on her brow and bound a white cloth about her forehead, as though she were sick of a wound. Then out of

his wallet he took an old dress, much worn but strong, like to the habit of a medicine man, and set it over his byrny, and such a sorry couple they made as it little would profit to rob. So they held on laboriously for three days, not daring to linger long in one place, but striking ever northwards through the greenwood. On the fourth day so weary was Torfrida that Feargus would have her to rest well, and in the dusk of evening they came to a stand in a glade of wondrous beauty nigh to where a burn ran, and were for resting there. He made the tent for Torfrida and cooked and ate of the stag's flesh which he had slain and drank of the burn. Then, having eaten, Feargus took his sword and bow and went to look around, following the burn. He had gone but a stone's throw from where they had set their camp when to his great amaze he saw a sheet of water stretching before him; he looked to the right hand and to the left down the broad stream. On the opposite bank was a forest, but of not such density as the Sherwood in which he stood. Where had he seen that place before? His heart leapt, for lo! they had come again to the spot at which they had crossed Trent water four days since! Then his

courage failed him and he leant against a tree and nigh wept. So long he stood that Torfrida, wondering what kept him, followed his track yet visible in the soft earth, and came upon him and marvelled, so still he stood, till she beheld the water and knew the place, and threw herself upon his neck, and they stood there long together without speech.

“Better would it be, Torfrida, for thee if thou didst cross once more Trent water and seek thy father, for great travail will be ours or we win the land of the bens, if ever we reach it; for much I doubt whether we may win so far north.”

“Nay, then thou wilt have an arrow for each of us.”

“An thou art so bravely minded, to-morrow we will rest and the next day hold on, and methinks here is a clear space by Trent side and, though if we ride along the water we will go too far to the east, I can here see the heavens and may pilot our way by the stars.” So they rested and then on for many a league, going oftentimes miles about for want of a path, and for fear of moss and water and thicket impassable. It chanced as they were riding one evening by Trent they saw a small boat flit from under the

opposite bank and strike across towards them. In it were three men clad in forest green, so that it was hard to tell them amongst the green leaves. Feargus sprang aground and ran swiftly forward, ere they knew him ware of their presence. Then with bow fixed he hailed them. "Ho! ye men in green. I give ye warning that he who but a bow raises shall lift bow no more for many days—halt, I say."

He who sat in the bow seized his arrows, however, and fitted one, then Feargus let his arrow forth and lo! it struck the man through the hand, and his bow had hardly slipped from his grasp ere another struck the side of the boat and pierced it.

"Now canst thou see what manner of bowman am I? hold, therefore, or by my next shot you will find yourselves in Trent. Then will I slay ye as ye swim to land."

Then said he of the wounded hand, "This is no mortal man but a giant; saw ye ever the like or bow of so great size? Little profit were it to fight with him." Then he said to Feargus, "Now, good master, what wilt thou of us? thou art a goodly bowman and we would land, for our boat hath a rent in her such as no bow-

man of mine could have made in so stout a craft."

"I ask a safe free passage through the forest."

"That we promise thee."

"I lack a guide also to lead me, and another with him as a surety for his good faith and that of thy men. And if he betray me then will I cut the throats of y^e both."

"Thou hast shot me through the hand, I would avail little against my own foes."

"Thou shalt not lack such defence as I can give thee against thine enemies as long as thou servest me."

"Thou speakest fair, an thou wilt let us land we will take thy terms."

"Then let the three of ye land, and give me thy troth and let thy men do likewise."

"I swear by the old gods and by the new God."

"And I." "And I."

So they landed, and Feargus tied the man's hands behind him, but the wounded captain he let free, after binding his wound. And he made them walk before him and kept an arrow in his hand ready. And so at last they left the Trent and struck north and west through the forest,

towards the lands of the Northern English beyond Mansfield. When they reached the forest marge, Feargus gave the captain his bow to defend him with, and let the green men go free. And they rode out through the lands of the North English who were once Penda's men, and soon found themselves well out of the forest and won a good road and followed it and came to a turning and there found a hostel where wayfarers might find rest and meat. So they entered and ate heartily. But soon a crowd collected outside, so wild were their looks, and so giantlike Feargus and rode such a monstrous beast, though the creature had little else to recommend him to a stranger, for Feargus had let him run wild and left him mud-stained to hide his worth, though food or other care he never lacked and ate ever before his master had eaten. Then the people gan asking Torfrida who her master might be and much ado she had to silence them, and Feargus began to fear that they might not safely stay in that hostel. Yet he little liked turning out again into the night, he being heavy for lack of sleep, for while the green men were with them he had got no rest, but ever had to watch that they did not betray them. And so as they

supped it chanced that, hearing of the strange people who had come into the town, there entered some soldiers who had fought for Penda, and Feargus knew them quickly. And they eyed him askance. And one of them, Godfree by name, had been a captain in Feargus's host in former days, and he had intelligence beyond the others, though his temper was evil. This man now came and stood near to them with knitted brow, as though thinking to solve some difficulty, and so till Feargus spoke; when he heard his voice the man started as though the earth had opened at his feet. Then with mouth agape and eyes starting from their sockets he backed to the door. All those that stood there looked on amazed.

"What seest thou?" said they.

"I see the ghost of him who betrayed our king, the mighty Penda," he gasped, "Feargus the Pict; but it is surely no ghost—it is Feargus, men. Slay him, the traitor! Down with him!"

Then Torfrida thought that all was lost, but Feargus arose with a bound and won the door before they could reach it and there stood with bow drawn, but he wished not to slay any, for he well knew that they would then follow him,

and, turning to Torfrida, he said in Gaelic, "Canst thou run and fetch the beasts to the door; no danger thou wilt meet, for none shall leave this hostel to tell those without till thou returnest."

"That can I," said Torfrida, and soon came back with the beasts and waited without. When Feargus reached the door and faced the men who were for leaving the hostel, his mighty bow drawn and a huge wooden table standing before him as a barrier, the captain, Godfree, stayed in his course, so likewise the others, looking to him for the lead. Godfree well knew the strength of Feargus and what things he had done, and the fame of him held the others in awe also. For they knew that though they might slay him, there would be few of their company left after it was done.

Then said he, "Hearken to me—never did Feargus betray Penda, but it is of common knowledge and was witnessed by many that he met the prince Osbert in a wood, and albeit he wished not to fight lest he should be too late to come up and keep tryst with Penda, Osbert forced him to it, and so the king failed for lack of men. Never did I betray him, for that I loved the king."

“He lies,” roared Godfree, recovering himself. “He hath ruined Mercia,” and then they all came forward clamouring, and so great was the noise that the townspeople came out and lined the road. Then Feargus knew that he must wait no longer, but strode through the door, and it had hardly closed on the heel of him ere he was astride his horse, and the two dashed down the street midst a shower of stones from the houses. As no one knew save the men behind why they fled or who they were no one stopped them, so they won the moor outside the town, and there drew up. Then Feargus turned to Torfrida and sighed, for she looked pale for want of rest, and frightened, and he took her by the hand, saying, “Once more, Torfrida. Thanks to thee.”

“Nay, without thy quickness and thy courage I could have done nothing.”

“And now, Torfrida, I see not which way there is left for us to turn; for if the North Angles knew me so also will the men of Elmet¹ and Northumbria. But an we do not enter Northumbria there remains nothing but the

¹ The Welsh of the kingdoms of Elmet and Loidis conquered by the Northumbrians.

wilds that lie to the north-west in South Strathclyde and Cumbria, where no man is, nor food, nor bield nor bush to shelter us from the wind, nor anything but moss and moor. We have been many days in coming this little gate, and if the rest of the way is as long to tread, then will winter be upon us ere we enter the wild country."

"Then let us still try Northumbria, for there at least are men and women and we may get through."

"So shall it be, Torfrida, an thou art so brave to bear the risk."

CHAPTER XIX

THEIR ADVENTURES AMONG THE NORTH ENGLISH

So they turned them north again and held on till they came upon a town. This time, not entering any hostel, they bought food and took it with them, with fodder for the beasts, and found a small wood that stood on the outskirts. Feargus here made Torfrida her tent again and set a fence around about with prickly whin and other bushes and brought the two beasts inside. And he lay down by his own horse and watched and ever and again rose and walked round and saw that all was still, but slept not, such little sleep as he got being by day when Torfrida could sit watching. So it fell that he was in sore need of rest and they stayed there three days. As soon as morning broke Torfrida would rise and go outside and watch while Feargus fell to sleep-

ing, and sweet was that rest to him. On the fourth day while Torfrida was watching she noticed that some men of the village were looking down upon them. At length, seeing no one stirring, they drew nearer and beheld Feargus, and gazed at him, agape at his thew and sinew.

“Now, good master, tell us what manner of man is this, for never yet saw we the like of him—surely he is more of warrior than of leech.”

“Go ye not too near unto him, lest ye disturb his sleep, for little might the twain of ye do against him an ye hurtled with him.”

“Nay, young master, but we are many; he is one.”

“Nay, I see but two of ye.”

“Aye, but others fill the forest and they have sent us to ask of him whether it be true as they say, that he is Feargus through whom king Penda was slain, for so we are told by men of the North English.”

Then Torfrida turned and went within the barrier, saying, “Surely he will best answer you himself.” And so she said to Feargus in Gaelic, “Arise, beloved one, for our troubles seem but begun; arise and lift with thee thy bow with arrow ready, for our foes are about us on every

hand. Safer I doubt we would be among the wolves of the west than here."

Then Feargus arose and stood before his enemies.

"What dost want?" said he, "that I may not be left in peace here in the greenwood?"

"They say thou art Feargus the Pict, the captain of king Penda."

"And what if I be Feargus: what is't that I owe thee?—nothing. Forget ye not that Osbert would not wait but forced me to fight; and so we both broke tryst with the king at the last, yet I served him right well—as well as the best of ye his own kin; and my men, who knew that Feargus would never desert his master, thought me dead and all died for Penda and stood to him saving his name when his own Mercians fled and left him. And what did Feargus himself do? Did not the king say that he it was who won the fight with king Sigmund by Trent water and at Mansfield town, and he had no small share in the victory at Camulodunum over king Anna of the East Anglians. So what is't that he owes ye?"

"Aye, but Feargus lost the cause at the last, so that all his deeds were of little profit. He is a traitor and we will slay him."

“ Then gather all thy comrades that are about the forest together, and when ye are all gathered then hear me; and if I cannot prevail on ye, ye must slay me.”

“ Nay, we will not gather them together, lest they being withdrawn ye might escape.”

“ Then move ye not a hand but set ye your minds in order.”

“ And why so, master? ”

“ Because an ye call not your comrades together they shall call not you so sound will ye both sleep, for these arrows shall fly to the hearts of ye. Ye wot Feargus was ever a man of his word save only that once when he failed through fate to tryst with Penda. Nay, an ye call for help or move ye shall die e'er help can reach ye.”

“ Spare us, noble Feargus, for we are men who have wives and young bairns.”

“ Gather your townsmen or die ere this stone reaches earth again, and if any man of yours lifts bow or brand I will slay thee,” said he, throwing high a great pebble.

“ We will do as ye command,” said they.

So they wound their horns and in from every quarter came soldiers and villagers, each man

armed to the teeth, for as Feargus had seen, they had surrounded them and left to the chief man of the town the work of bearding the noble quarry. Then, when they were all gathered, Feargus, with bow stretched, whistled soft, and as if by his own will his great white horse arose and came to him, and then said he to Torfrida in the Gaelic, "Now run to thy beast and mount; leap then the fence and ride straight into the forest, the road is clear, and when thou canst just see me in the distance, wait, that I may not lose thee."

Then before the astonished soldiers could stir she leapt the bushes in the rear, gathering her plaid and tent up as she went, and made for the wood, and in a moment was out of sight. There was a slight movement among the villagers, and some shouted, "Take him, he will escape." But Feargus drew back the string of that mighty bow till the chief man's son cried, "Stay, stay, or he will slay my father!" while the old man trembled. Then Torfrida blew her whistle, and promptly Feargus leapt on to his horse and, sitting with back to the beast's head, kept his arrow fixed on the old man. Then, speaking a word to the beast, it dashed through the fence in the track

of its fellow; and the angry villagers saw them depart, but might not follow for fear of that terrible bow. When he had quite disappeared they took horse and lifted horn and rode after him, for greatly were they put to shame at being outwitted through fear for one man. So they rode and ran and raised a great hue and cry. But Feargus and Torfrida rode on nor stopped until Torfrida was faint for very weariness. Then said Feargus, "Here let us draw up, for thou art much distressed, and so withal are the poor beasts. To-morrow we must on again—little rest is there for us or them." He gathered whin in the open and other bushes and made a fence and put Torfrida and also the beasts within, kindling a fire to scare the wild creatures. Then he went forth to gather food for the horses, sweet grasses, and corn which he had bought in the village. And he came upon a deer and shot it and cut it up and cooked it, and they ate with great heartiness. And the beasts lay still beside him, so tame were they grown, and so keen were their ears they could tell from afar the coming of any wild creature, and then Feargus would rise up with his sword and lift a faggot to scare it. But so keen did Feargus himself soon become

that no sound or mark escaped him. So it was that he kept out of the track of men, until after wandering through mire and moss they drew out of the lands of the North English, thinking to enter the great wild which lay between Lune and Wharfe and stretched well nigh to Solway and the western seaboard. And they struck across the moorlands of Wharfe towards Cumbria, but so heavy was the road that the days came and went and saw them but little on their path. Oft-times they despaired of ever seeing Alban, and their hearts were heavy when they thought of all the gate they had yet to go. And ever the winter drew nearer and filled Feargus with dread. So they strayed among the glens, and every night he would find a place of safety for Torfrida. Sometimes he would make her a tent among the whins and bracken, sometimes would stretch over the heather the skins of the many animals he had slain; at times in caves or 'mongst the rocks of some mountain or cataract he stretched her tent on stakes of wood and there she would sleep serene. Then he would set forth on foot in search of food. So on they sped, lying now on the bare brae side, now in wild glens, ever faring northward. And the nights

grew cold and the snell wind swept keen up the glens or over the bleak braes, and now the wolves and wild beasts drew nearer at night, for the frost fell upon the earth and left them scant of food.

CHAPTER XX

HOW FEARGUS FELL AMONG THIEVES

It chanced one night that Feargus went forth on foot and wandered over the moors, finding nothing for his arrows. And his white horse followed him like a dog, now stopping a hundred paces behind to crop the grass, now running forward as it listed. At length, being weary, Feargus sat him down not noticing that hard by him were the remains of a camp fire. He laid his sword aside him and unloosened his harness and fell to thinking, and was right sad when he minded him of all Torfrida had come through for his sake. "Better," said he, "would it have been had I died by Osbert's hands, in sooth." Then suddenly he got a blow on the head and was seized by each shoulder, while a man stepped forward and lifted his sword and turned it against him.

"Now yield ye, sir Redbeard, for whoever thou be," said one.

Then Feargus seized the one who held his right arm and swung him to the earth and the one to the left he struck with his clenched fist and then dashed upon him who held the sword, but the robber instantly struck him with it in the shoulder that the blood spurted forth, and then another ran forward with a bow and fitted an arrow thereto and made to shoot him. Then Feargus paused, for he thought what would befall Torfrida alone on the moor, and he felt the blood running from him, for he had had his byrny unloosed as also the shirt of mail that clad him to the elbow, so that he had no defence against his foes. Then he reasoned that it would be better to give way now and escape afterwards if chance offered. So he allowed them to bind his hands, whereupon those whom he had hurt fell upon him and beat him sorely, stripping off his byrny, and ever he bled; but when they went to lift his shirt of mail from him he said, " Coward swordsmiths are ye, for ye have beaten a wounded foe who is a prisoner and without arms, and now go for to strip him of his mail though the night be keen for a whole man and worse for a wounded one, and it will do ye little good for there is not one among your company

who is of size to wear it." Then one who was the captain among them struck him upon the mouth in answer. Feargus uttered an oath in Gaelic, whereupon the captain again struck him, and then they took him one on either side and walked on, but one of the company came forward drawing forth a kerchief. "Better he would walk, perchance," said he, "if the blood were staunched, for he groweth faint and hard work were it to carry so long a loon." So the robber bound his wound and that not without skill or tenderness. Then did Feargus mutter faintly in his own tongue, "Thanks to thee for I see thou art a man, whatever company it be that thou art in."

They went on down into the glen, but Feargus was too faint to mark the way, his head swam and he had no sense left, but there was before him a vision of Torfrida seated on the moor midst a handful of pine trees, with the beasts lying near, for he never doubted that the white horse would find his way back to her, and she waiting vainly for his return. The robbers led him westwards, down the glen, and there among the rocks they entered a large cavern, the mouth of which could not be seen from any distance

outside. The place was filled with peat-reek from a great fire, and at the further end they led him into a smaller cave, one of the men showing the way with a lighted faggot. Dark and cold and damp the place was, and the water trickled down the walls in sickly streams, but Feargus recked not but fell down amidst of it on the floor and slept. In the night he wakened, feeling stiff and full of pain, weak and an hungered. He thought again of Torfrida on the moor, and his heart grew sick. At length one came to him and brought him food, and said he, "Our captain bids me tell thee that an thou wilt join his band thou shalt live, despite the hurt thou hast give him; but an thou refusest thou shalt die."

So Feargus ate and drank and slept, and, there being no light, he could not tell whether it were night or day when he awoke, but of a sudden some one whispered to him in his native tongue—

"Thou art a North Pict by thy speech; I am of the south, yet are we all of one blood and one tongue, though whiles, alas! of two ways of thinking; arise, brother, and pass out, and thou wilt find thy bow hanging on the wall on the right hand as thou goest: thou art o'er brave to

die thus by the hands of the English. A sword thou wilt find at thy side and the skin of a deer to cover thy nakedness. I am a robber yet will I not see my kin robbed."

"A brother art thou indeed, as thou sayest, and great thanks I owe thee, though I naught can give thee to show it, but if ever I win Alban and thou comest thither, a hearthstone thou shalt find to thee and shall lack nothing that I can give thee, as long as thou livest; for I am son to king Nechtan and my name is Feargus."

"Then have I heard much of thee and right glad I am to serve so noble a warrior. Go lest they awake, it is about the dawn; such courage as thou hast can do the rest. I will meet thee yet in thy father's hall and be thy man, for never can I stay in my own country more for an evil man have I been."

"Thy name?"

"Domnhull MacEachran MacGilliosa."

Then Feargus crept out stealthily and took the bow and the sword, wrapping the deer skins around him. There he saw the robbers lying, and he counted them in the dim light of the dying fire and passed on thinking they were all, when, as he neared the entrance, he stumbled over a man's

body. The man started up, sword in hand, and Feargus felt that he was over weak to do battle with him, so quickly stabbed him ere he had fully risen, that he fell back dead. Then he heard the others bestirring within, roused by the noise, and he fled; but he knew by the sounds that the whole cave was now astir. Little knowing the glen he sped slowly, and those behind were gaining upon him; so stiff was his left shoulder that he could not use his bow, and when he reached the top of the steep side of the glen he was breathless and faint, but staggered on across the moor. Then came the robbers on behind him in full chase, and he felt that he was lost, when lo! from out a small planting or spinney on his right a creature ran with a joyous neigh, and ere he could gather his senses he was nosed all over head and face by his own great horse. The beast seemed so overjoyed that Feargus well-nigh wept over him, being weak. Then he scrambled to the creature's back and, patting its neck, left it to go which way it listed, for he himself knew not the road back to Torfrida. And his foes saw a great grey horse run from among the trees and then their quarry mounted it and the two were spirited away like shadows of the

gloaming. The horse took its way without hesitation across the moor, and soon came to the spot where was Torfrida. And she was overjoyed at the sight of them and kissed first Feargus and then the beast. But Feargus himself was so weak that he nearly fell as he dismounted, and Torfrida dressed his wound and gave him water and what food she had remaining, and she sat awake all that night watching him. In the morning she found him still too weak to move, and they dreaded lest the robbers should find them. So when he was for rising to seek food Torfrida bade him lie still, and went and set a trap as he directed her, and they waited until they caught a bird which she cooked in the peat ash, and they fared well. So each night Torfrida watched and slept in the day, and they stayed in the wood for a week.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW THEY FARED IN THE WILD COUNTRY

AFTER that time, by reason of his great strength and the cleanness of his blood, the wound was well-nigh healed. So Feargus took his bow and went forth and brought food in great plenty, and they mounted their beasts, which were eager to be away, and rode down across the moor until they won the burn by which the robbers dwelt. Feargus knew it not again, for he had been too weak to mark the way, but as they reached the glen he noticed his beast to tremble and he told Torfrida and hurried her over the stream, bidding her ride forward a good space, and then lie down among the heather, for danger was near. "And much I wish I had my byrny and my great sword," said he. Then for fear aught should befall the beast he rode, he dismounted and made the creature lie down, and took his bow and

went back towards the ford. There he crouched down and waited; for he thought that if the robbers were on their track it would be better to meet them as they reached the ford than allow them to cross, but he sighed again for his great sword and his byrny of rare workmanship. Then as he lay he became aware of a man clad in russet hiding among the stones, and he knew they had been seen. He watched the man till he arose and ran down towards the foot of the glen, and presently returned with five men, leading horses. Among them was he who had dressed his wound whom he took to be the Pict. When he saw them his wrath was great for all the ill they had done him, and belike many more, and for so little pity they had shown or soldier-ship. Then said he, "Little me liketh bloodshed, but these shall die ere they win the north side of the burn; for further hurt will they else do to many. Then, moreover, he bethought him of his armour and knew not how he could win through all that lay before him without it; so he looked again at his enemies and there were five of them, less the Pict, who would not be willing to fight against him. "I have before now set as many on their backs by

help of wit and these arrows, and, moreover, the burn is between us and they will have no shelter."

Now they had almost won the ford and Feargus put an arrow to his bow, and as the first man entered the water to cross he raised to his knee and sent the arrow forth. In the act he felt his wound and it angered him; the man fell back into the water with the arrow sticking in him a foot deep, and neither shout nor groan gave he, for Feargus was a merciful death-dealer. The captain, seeing his man swept away in the flood, cried "On." Then Feargus, that he might know who was before him, stood upright; but the captain knew well, forsooth, and halted them before they touched the water, to shoot their arrows. Feargus lay down in the heather to avoid them, but they having the water before them were without shelter, so again he drew his bow, and another leapt forward and fell headlong into the stream, to be quickly followed by a third. There only remained the Pict and the captain, who turned to flee. Then Feargus shouted out, "Now, sir captain, an ye turn, ye shall die, ere ye have fled fifty paces, an ye stand ye shall fight hand to hand with me, for where

odds are equal I will take no vantage of bow or arrow, though I be without byrny. I have left thee till the last for thou didst in cowardly wise strike me when wounded, and I would that thou shouldst see the ruin of thy men and thyself." Then Feargus moved forward, and the captain turned to the Pict, saying, "Why standest thou and slay him not?"

"Nay, sir captain, I have wrought much evil since thou didst take me and force me to join thy band, but never did I yet take hand with a stranger like thee against mine own kin. A king's son at least is this, and though I will take no part against thee neither will I help thee; ye are man to man and thine enemy is without byrny, so ye may fight it out." Then he held out his sword to Feargus, who straightway gave it back again, saying, "Nay, keep it, kinsman."

Then the captain, seeing there was nothing left but to fight, drew, and Feargus drew also his sword, but it was not his own blade; fiercely they fell to and the robber wrought with great might till Feargus drew back a pace and dealt a great blow, and the blade shore the robber's helm clean through the side, leaving the head

unharméd, but breaking itself nigh to the hilt, and the robber staggered from left to right as one drunk. Then Feargus was without arms, but, keeping still the broken hilt of the sword in his hand, he dashed at his antagonist, striking him full in the face; then wresting the sword from his hand, flung it across the burn and, lifting the robber, gripped him so hard that he cried out; then, running a few paces, hurled him into the flood nigh to where it took a mighty leap of many feet amid jagged rocks: and so no creature save the raven saw him thereafter. Feargus turned back to where the Pict stood awe-stricken at so fierce a fight, and he took his bow and bade him lead to the cave. Lightly he obeyed, and they entered, and there Feargus found his byrny and his great sword of wondrous temper and all that he had lost. Then the Pict told him they must get away lest the rest of the band should return from the neighbouring dales and find their captain slain. "And I will take what will serve me and fly, for they will not believe my story, and I will away into Galloway privily and find my kin and then will I come north to serve thee all my days, for the greatest of warriors art thou. Thou wilt find difficulty

enough in fending for thyself and thy young friend else would I join thee."

So the Pict went one way and Feargus went another, and stripping off the skins with which he was clad he sprang into the stream and swam about, for his wound's sake. Then being refreshed, he gained the land and dressed him and donned his byrny, over it casting the skins to hide the brightness of it and called his horse, which arose quickly and followed him. When Torfrida saw that he had his sword again and his byrny she was rejoiced greatly. So they rode on across the moor and they could see nothing save heather and whin and bracken, with clumps of trees far apart, and patches of bog covered with long grass, and the wild myrtle that sent forth a sweet smell, and in the distance hills and glens innumerable. So they journeyed for many days. But ever the nights drew out and the days drew in, and Feargus had much ado to find food or a dry spot to cast their tent in, and the cold strengthened and much rain fell and sometimes hail and snow. And they were often forced to spend whole days in resting and waiting for the storms to abate. And sometimes they lost their road among the fells. They stayed

now on the bare hill side where nothing but the cry of the paitrick or the plover was to be heard the year through; now in wild glens; by crag and loch and burn ever northward wending. Soon they found the winter sore upon them, and the snow lay thick and covered all the land, and the horses had nothing wherewith to satisfy their hunger. In the darkness came wild beasts, and they had to build a great fire each night around them to scare the creatures. And whiles they drew right up to it scenting the horses and then drew back, and at length so bold they grew that one night two giant wolves leapt across the flames nigh to where Feargus sat, sword in hand, but hardly had they reached the earth ere he plunged his sword down the open jaws of one and kicked the other backwards into the fire with his foot. And the snow became so deep that Feargus built a snow house each night for Torfrida, and himself stood by the watch-fire outside. And so they sped, the hazel nut and red deer their food, or whatever his bow could bring down; and from all dangers he shielded her, or labour or weariness or cold, so far as he might in so terrible a clime. But often his heart failed him and he felt that death lay before them. At length the



The feet of Feargus sank deep in the snow at every step, and made him weary, but he fared on.



horses waxed weak for lack of food, and he cut the meat from the beasts he slew for them, but he saw that an he could not soon win a clachan or farmstead they must die.

Their way still lay among the mountains and little food could they there find, so one evening Feargus started out in quest thereof and his feet sank deep in the snow at every step and made him weary, but he fared on. At last he turned, thinking to travel back by his footprints, but of a sudden the sky had grown overcast, and a gust of wind soughed up the glen and in a moment it was as though a mist had fallen upon him, for he could see neither behind nor before, nor sky nor land, so small and close fell the snow. On he stumbled trying now to guess the way back and crying out at intervals, "Torfrida! Torfrida!" Then he stooped down to seek the footprints, but found that all were filled with the driving snow; still he went on hour after hour and like to drop for weariness, and ever and anon crying "Torfrida!"

And Torfrida lay awaiting him in her house builded of snow on the top of a steep hill; for they feared to stay in the glens at that time lest the snow-drifts should bury them. As the dark-

ness closed in she set a light to her fire. Then, of a sudden, the storm burst upon them and had it not been that their place of halting was cunningly chosen in a spot sheltered from the winds common in that quarter, her fire would have been quenched altogether. The darkness thickened and fear fell upon her for her lover, and she stood in the doorway watching over the plain below. It might be about midnight when far away across the fells in front of her she thought she heard the cry "Torfrida!" She fancied it foreboded his death, and wished herself dead, for their troubles seemed like to overwhelm them. All night the tempest raged, and all the day following, and still she fed the fire, till her heap of faggots grew low, for she knew that it would be his only guide, if guide he longer needed. On the night of the second day she again thought she heard that weird cry "Torfrida!" and arose and shrieked "Feargus! Feargus!" Then she fancied she saw a great white form staggering about far down on the moor beneath, till at length it fell or seemed to, then slowly and with little life arose once more; then she tried to go out to it, but was too weak and full of horror, for a creature of another world this might be and she

swooned, and as she awoke suddenly a giant form rose up before her deep covered with snow frozen to it from beard to foot, and with one wild cry, "Torfrida!" it staggered forward and fell headlong at her feet, and she knew that he had come.

CHAPTER XXII

HOW THEY FELL AMONG FOES

So they stayed there on the hillside for a week and then arose and went forward, but with heavy hearts and weary feet, leaving behind them Torfrida's palfrey, which had died for very weariness; and the two wept as they went forth once more across the wilderness. At length they drew near to a broad burn which they crossed, and, faring on, soon beheld a town to the left of them and knew not in what country they were, but feared they had come too far to the east and had entered Northumbria. They pressed on till they drew nigh to the town and anon met men coming forth of it, but these stared aghast at sight of them and fled, so wild were their looks and so lean and haggard their faces. At length they came to a herdsman's shieling high up on the hills, and Torfrida went in and found the herd with his wife sitting by the ingle. When the wife beheld her she let

forth a scream; then said Torfrida, "Nay, good people, have no fear, for I am a woman of thine own country and an hungered, yet gold have we to pay thee for such shelter as thou canst give."

"The lady is beautiful and looks good—she is welcome to all we have."

"Nay, but I ask the boon also for my lover who is without, but so great of stature is he and so wild are his looks from much travail that we twain have come through, that methought he might fear thee."

"Yea let him enter also."

Then Feargus entered and sat him down, and the people were Northumbrians, and when the good wife saw him she said, "Now thou art a man indeed!" So they fared well in that house for three weeks, and Feargus waxed strong again, as did Torfrida, and light of heart, for it seemed as though their troubles were ended, since here they did not know him for Feargus. At length they minded them of their journey, and Feargus brought forth his beast that looked well and stout as of old, and rejoiced his master's heart. Their host then found a good beast for Torfrida, and they rode out and sought to escape the town, but they had hardly won clear of it ere a party

of soldiers met them and hailed Feargus and questioned him and, judging him to be a foreigner, took him before the king, who knew him for Feargus. Then were they cast each into a dungeon, while a messenger was sent to king Sigmund and Osbert, the king's friends, telling of their capture. Now none had seen that under his rags Feargus wore a byrny, and his jailors, being half afraid of him owing to the tales of his strength and fierceness, which were common among the Northumbrian soldiery, had left him his sword and bow. They lay in the prison for a week, and the dungeon of Feargus was such that he could not hold himself upright therein, and the walls were dank with water. He looked about for means of escape, and soon knew by slight sounds that there was a person in the cell next him and so he knocked on the wall, thinking it might be Torfrida, and at once heard an answering knock. Then, his heart beating fast for gladness, he set about digging at the wall with his sword, and dug with great labour all the night, and by morning had wrought so well that one of the stones was loosened and he lifted it out and they spoke together. Then said she, "See how the Northumbrians treat a king's

daughter," and he saw that there were chains about her, but dreading that he might brain him, the jailor had left the manacling of his male prisoner until such times as he might be weak from lack of food.

Feargus worked for two nights and days until he had removed another stone, and could creep through the opening. He then set to work to cut away the stone which held the bolt in the door of Torfrida's cell, taking the stones of the wall by which he entered in and out each day, and returning to his own cell at the hour at which the jailor brought his prisoners' food, for he came first to Torfrida's cell. Then he told Torfrida to hold herself in readiness, and at length one night lay down before the door of his dungeon, so that when the man came in he fell over him, and Feargus sprang upon him and stunned him, then tearing his jerkin into shreds, twisted them into a rope and bound him with it that he might not rouse the men who stood on guard. He then bade Torfrida to follow, and forth they sped in the cool night wind towards the water, and no man stopped them. So they won the sea and walked along the coast towards where the shipping lay. There they found many

small boats lying, and entered into one of them, and, fearing to linger, put out to sea. In her they found water and a little meat, but she was open to the seas. They rowed till they were out of sight of land and then turned northwards by the stars. They kept out at sea so that in the day they could just make out the distant shore.

On the second day the wind blew cold and Torfrida was sore distressed, and in the night it arose to a tempest and they were tossed about for many hours, the boat flying before the wind so that they had no mastery over her. When the day dawned they found that they had been driven out to sea and had lost sight of the coast, and they were mightily afraid thereof. At length on the fourth day the sea grew calm and the wind fell. Then Feargus took to his oars, but no sight of land could he get, and he steered him as he best might. They had little meat to eat the while, or water to drink, for their store had been but scant at the beginning. He rowed ever on till weariness fell upon him, and still he rowed, and daily saw Torfrida dwining before his eyes. His heart smote him, for was it not by his own doing that so great trouble had fallen



Then Feargus thought that Torfrida was like to die, for she fainted,
and lay for long as one in death.



upon her? Soon they had neither bite nor sup left, and the cold winds cut them to the quick. Then Feargus thought that Torfrida was like to die, for she fainted, and lay for long as one in death. There came to him the thought of slaying himself; he waited long but at last she awoke, and he drew his sword and cut his arm and poured the blood down her throat till she revived. Then he bound up his arm that she might not know wherewith he had fed her. Once more he took the oars, though full faint himself, and sped on, but hope was dead in him and he listed not whither he went. And all through the night the cold stars look down upon the little boat bearing the gaunt man, who seemed like to one in a dream, who nor feeling nor sense hath of earthly things, yet ever plyeth his oars monotonously. His eyes were glassy, and fixed ever on the white-faced woman who lay at his feet with the marks of death already upon her. And neither he nor she spake, nor had done for many days. As the night wore through the big man ceased to move to and fro, and drawing with a last effort his oars from the water, fell backward into the bottom of the boat. So, until the sun was high in the lift. Then he started up but knew not

where he was nor what thing had befallen him, but only saw that not a bowshot from him was a line of grey cliff, mist-haunted, bird-inhabited, and washed by mighty waters whose thunder echoed continually along the crags. Then did he know himself and staggered up and shouted, "Land, land!" And dimly through the mist of her half-consciousness Torfrida knew that they were saved.

Then Feargus roused him and drew forth the oars and steered their way among the rocks and green waters now still and sleepful that had been so fierce. Here they had made a small bay, there a creek; into one of these he steered the boat up against the rocks, whence he saw the birds fly forth, and at length in a cranny he saw some eggs lying. These he seized and broke and poured between the lips of Torfrida and then of himself. In the creek he found a ledge of rock above high water, and rowed his boat to it and fastened her and there lay down and slept for an hour. Then he arose and, being too weak to use his bow, found more eggs and fed Torfrida with them. Then he landed by scrambling on to the shelf of rock, and, seeking about, found pools of rain water and drank and gave likewise to Tor-

frida. The next day found him refreshed so that he was able to lift her on to the shelf and himself rowed out a little way in search of eggs, which he found among the crags in great plenty. So they stayed there many days, living in a cave and wandering among the rocks like the sea birds themselves, their daily food the eggs of the seamew and cormorant. And the place was always dark, lying like a watery ravine between the crags, so that the sun never shone there; but their hearts lay deep too between the sorrows that encompassed them and they missed him not. At length their strength was renewed, but they were still fearful of going forth once more on a journey so terrible. And when they left their watery home they sighed, for days of peace had they known there, who had forgotten what peace was; and the cry of the seamew, the floating mists, and the boom of breaking waters had become dear to them, while the very birds knew them and feared them not.

And so, at length, they stepped into their boat and rowed through the creek out into the sunlight, and the sight of it gladdened them. They kept along the cliffs that day and in the evening ran up one of the narrow creeks and waited till

the morn. After many miles the cliffs ceased and an open coast took their place, then Feargus thought to land and find out what country they were in; so they made the shore, and right glad was Feargus to find they were in the land of Lothian, not knowing they had won so far north. In those days the Kelts of the Lothians were groaning under the rule of the Northumbrians, whose language they came afterwards to speak, though they still kept their nationality and their patriotism, even if they grew in some measure away from their Gaelic kindred of the north and west. So at length after sailing up a broad river, wanting food and water, they saw a great town lying low down towards the water's edge, and Feargus landed, and they approached the town, which they found to be the ancient Roman city of Camelon on Forth, that stood hard by the Roman wall. After walking some way they were noticed by the people and surrounded by a band of warriors of the chief who was set over Lothian and called himself king. They were hurried through splendid gates of brass to the town, the people coming out of their houses to look at them, and were brought before the

king, who was a Northumbrian and had much wealth and many foreign warriors in his pay. Now his thane had bethought him that the sight of folk so rude as looked these twain would pleasure his master. The king, who had an eye for fighting men, saw in Feargus the shape of a warrior, and knew by the way he strode and held himself that he was a practised and strong man of his hands, and was well pleased to have such brought to him, thinking to win him to his service. If the master knew a warrior though ill clad, his men did not, but thought him little better than a savage or a slave. Feargus knew well by their tongue that they were English and ruling a people who were near kin to his own and he was wroth to see it, and being full of strength from his life on the cliffs, and seeing Torfrida's face smooth and shining with health, he was little in the humour to brook insult offered. So it chanced as the king stood questioning him that one of his nobles turned to Torfrida and laid rough hands upon her, saying, "Come hither, lad, let me see thee; thou lookest like a wench," and so drew aside the ragged covering which hid her face. When the people saw her beauty they were amazed thereat, but not long

gazed the earl upon her, for his hand was hardly off her snood ere Feargus, seizing his sword, clove him through the helm, nigh killing him, and crying in English, "Manners, thou dog!"

The earl's men turned to flee for very horror of the thing they saw, till their captain rallied them, and, crying out for vengeance, rushed upon Feargus. Then the king, who was just and dearly loved a bold act, was mightily taken with his new soldier, and he roared in a voice of thunder, "Stand; let no man stir, I will deal." Turning to Feargus, he said, "Now, beggar or warrior, for such I see thou art, what sayest thou for thyself? Thou hast nigh slain an earl of my court."

"That were a mishap indeed, sir king; but I hold that when I struck him his acts were such that no man, being a stranger, could tell him for an earl, for I have seen beggars and billmen with better manners; therefore am I not to blame more than if I had slain a worse beggar than myself."

"Humph! thou art an outspoken beggar, in sooth, but I tell thee thou shalt go unharmed an thou wilt enter my bodyguard, for they lack a captain at this present, and I see thou art such a

man of thy hands that I wot of none that could captain them like thee."

Now Feargus saw that the bluff king was a man after his own heart, good humoured yet resolute and strong, and he knew well that his only chance was to enter his new friend's service, so he said—

"I will do as thou dost wish, king, since thou hast so befriended us, and I will serve thee well and faithfully for so long as my lady and myself go unmolested," and he put his two hands between those of the king as the English custom was.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW TORFRIDA WAS STOLEN

So they stayed some months at the court of Lothian, and Torfrida had a house set apart for her and maids to wait and do her bidding and had full liberty to walk about freely, but she saw little of Feargus, for he was much away on the king's business. And Feargus knew not how they might get away from these parts, and wondered much how it fared with Edwy and Sigmund.

And one evening it chanced that Torfrida was walking late in her garden when of a sudden from the hedgerows on either side burst armed men with their faces masked. Torfrida, being surprised, stood still for a moment, when she was seized from behind and a cloth cast about her, then strong hands lifted her and she was borne away till they came to where seemed to be horses waiting. She was then taken up and borne on the saddle before the rider, and they

rode for many miles over much uneven ground. She could hear that on either side and behind her were horsemen. At length they drew up, then Torfrida heard the noise of a drawbridge and the tramp of the hoofs of the beasts as they rode across; then it was drawn up behind them and at the sound the heart fell within her. They carried her into the castle, for such she deemed it wherein she was. The cloth was now withdrawn from her head and she saw that she was in a large chamber, handsomely furnished and hung around with rich tapestry, and with her was a stout woman in the dress of a servant.

“ Oh, where am I, why have they brought me here? ” said she.

“ Thou art safe, lady; they have brought thee here because my master, the prince, has loved thee since the day they took thee to the king with yon great man thy squire.”

“ Oh, tell me who is thy master? I know him not.”

“ Weep not, lady; my master is right comely.”

“ What is his comeliness to me? ”

“ Nay, thou hast seen him, but thou wouldst not look upon him, so he was angered, and he knew that his father, the king, set too much

store by thy knight to let him take thee from him, even if he had a wish to fight thy lord, which methinketh few men about the king have. So he cast round for a way to win thee, and none other could he think of but the taking of thee in this wise—but there, I am telling thee too much. It matters little, for I am sent, my lady, to tell thee that my master, prince Siegfried, wills to wed thee to-night—for he fears to lose thee still; even now the priest awaits thy coming, and the feast is spread.”

Torfrida groaned aloud.

“As thou art a woman I beg thee to let me hence. Let me go out into the mountains and the woods that the wild beasts may devour me.”

“Nay, thou art over young and comely, and I would not if I could, for it would be shame.”

“Nay, good woman, not shame as great as mine will be when this wild beast thou speakest of, thy master, comes. Let me hence and amongst the hills and moors I may find men who speak the Gaelic tongue and will befriend me.”

“Nay, thou art in the hills here and all the men about Glencorse and Bonaly are adread of the prince and this new castle, and thou wouldst lose thyself and be drowned in the bogs that

surround us long before any of the Pictland men could succour thee, for hills encompass Glen-corse on every side and the paths are hard to find to a stranger. And they would quickly follow thee with dogs and men and there would be no escape."

"Oh, say not so, good woman, for I could slay myself by leaping into the burn or into the bog—it were easy."

"Nay, vex not thyself, child. Thou wilt soon be reconciled. And if I let thee free, then would the prince be so angry that he would turn me into the night, if he did not slay me, and I am old and the fireside is my place, and I have neither kith nor kin to shelter me in this wild country."

"Nay, then, if thou fearest for thyself let me escape on to the battlements and I will throw myself from them and thy master will never know thou hast shown me the way, but will believe I have escaped from thee. And I will give thee these rings and this collar of gold worth a king's ransom, an thou wilt be rich." And Torfrida threw herself on the ground and clasped and kissed the woman's feet.

"Nay, rise, sweet girl, for I lack courage for

this thing thou askest. I would serve thee if I could for never have I seen any woman so modest and so comely as thou art. Greet no more and have no fear, for the prince is mad for love of thee and will let no harm befall thee, but will wed thee and make thee lady of his house and the queen of all his lands."

Now Torfrida saw that she could not move the woman and she arose and bade her leave her, and the woman went. Then Torfrida ran round the room to see whether there were any hope of escape, but the windows were small and set high up on the walls, and across them were stout iron bars. Now she saw that the walls were built of huge logs of wood and were of great thickness, and from the windows were hangings of heavy tapestry. In the wide chimney upon a stone slab fixed into the earth floor burnt a fire of wood. Torfrida drew forth a burning faggot and then stepped to the windows and set the hangings alight, then she ran to the tapestry on the walls and did the like. In an instant there was a roar that frightened her and she screamed; she could not help it, as a sheet of flame shot up the walls. Only the inner side remained and Torfrida, recovering herself, in her frenzy went to



Torfrida drew forth a burning faggot, and then stepped to the windows and set the hangings alight.



light the wall, though her terror of what she had done almost overcame her. As she stooped to apply the faggot the door flew open and a huge woman with red face and flaunting dress stood over her, and with a cry of astonishment and rage struck Torfrida with her open hand upon the ear with such force that she, being light and slim of figure, fell upon the ground. She lay for a moment and then arose, but as she gained her feet the woman struck her again on the other side of the head so that she fell down again upon her knees.

“ Huzzy! ” she screamed, “ who are you that would burn us in our beds? ” and then she walked to the door and cried “ Fire! ” and in a moment men came running with vessels filled with water, and they tore the hangings down and in ten minutes, so well they wrought, that they had quenched all the flames.

Then Torfrida, dizzy and sick with the blows she had received, stole out of the door unnoticed in the smoke and confusion, and turned along the corridor, thinking to throw herself from the battlements. She passed swiftly along a maze of narrow passages till she found a stair; up this she ran and presently felt a breath of wind, and

turned to face it thinking it might come from the battlements. She sped along, staggering much from the blows she had received, till she saw a door and pushed it open and, lo! she found herself in a large hall and before her stood the big red-faced stout woman who had struck her. Torfrida screamed and begged for mercy.

“Ha, huzzy! thou wert thinking to escape. My son wed thee, forsooth! Thou imp of evil! thou witch! Wouldst burn us in our beds! I will teach thee better manners,” and she seized her by the wrist with one hand and beat her with the other till the blood flowed from her nose and mouth and she sank down in a swoon. Then the woman got water and threw it over her and picked her up like an infant, and taking her into another room laid her upon a bed and left her, locking the door as she went. And presently the old tire-woman came in and when she saw her she wept. “Then she hath beaten thee, poor child. No wonder the king cannot live with so great a brute!” And she washed the blood from Torfrida’s nose and mouth and kissed her and put cold bandages round her head. “Ah, thou wert foolish not to give way as I told thee and wed the prince without ado, for he

will defend thee from her, and I will wait upon thee and love thee, for I have nothing else to love."

Knowing she could not move her, Torfrida thanked the woman and bid her go and return in an hour, and she said, "I charge ye, good woman, tell no one of the usage I have received at this dame's hands, for it puts shame upon me."

In an hour the wife returned and found Torfrida calm and white and bland, with a smile upon her face, and her manner was decided and she no longer craved for help.

"Go, good wife," she said, "and tell the prince, thy master, that an he loves me he must leave me to-night. I am ill and sore and weary with the rough handling and rough riding, for tell him women have not the strength of men; but I know thy master is a soldier and brave, they say, and would not needlessly distress a maiden even if he loved her not. Now I charge you, my woman, speak him fair as I speak," added she, "for an thou dost not thou shalt be no woman of mine when I am queen of thy master's hearth."

"Now thou speakest, my lady, and I will do thy bidding, as I would be thy tire-woman, for

well I know thou art a great lady and a king's daughter."

Then she went below and entered the hall where sat the prince at the board, fierce, impatient, and flushed. At his side were his companions, wild, loose sots, half soldiers, half forest robbers. Among them were many of the native Britons of Lothian of the race of Gwynedd, who had entered the service of the conqueror that they might keep their lands, even though below them was a sturdy race of clansmen full of the spirit of nationality and true to the nation of the Southern Albanich or Picts to which their land of Gododin had been joined, and friendly also to the stronger nation of the Northern Picts. These men, deserted by their natural chiefs, were waiting only for the leadership of a few strong men to take up arms against the Anglian settlers. In the Pentland and Muirfoot hills, and indeed in all the hill country, the Britons and Picts had been able to hold their own. At the prince's board were also one or two soldiers of fortune or outlaws of the nation of the South Picts and the rest Northumbrians, Mercians, Lindeseymen, and men from other quarters, a motley throng. At the side of the prince stood a priest of un-

pleasant feature and shifty eye. At the other end of the table opposite the prince was a vacant chair, richly embroidered and draped with crimson and cloth of gold; to right and left of this sat the ladies of the chiefs. When he saw that the tire-woman had not Torfrida with her, the prince looked angry, but when she delivered her message his wrath was mollified for, be it said, he had great fear of his father's captain and of his father, who loved only the fair fight, and within him was a foreboding of evil; but if the lady were going to prove willing what could her lover or the king have to complain of if they married? He could then spread it abroad that the lady had fled with him to escape from her squire. And was it not easy to believe that she should choose him instead of a beggarly captain! And so he smiled and sent back a message to her that she must be of good cheer, for nothing should she lack that gold might buy. So the wife returned and Torfrida retired to her bed-chamber and tried to sleep. In the morning the woman entered.

“How doth my lady this morning?”

“Nay, I am weary and will not rise to-day.”

“But the prince, my lady?”

"What of the prince?"

"He wishes at least to see thee and has been walking the hall the night through so distracted is he for love of thee."

"Tell him I am sick."

So they let her alone that day, but the next the woman came again. "My lady, the prince hath been pacing the walls all the night, and he saith he dieth for love of thee, and I would counsel thee, if thou wilt take my rede, not to delay; for like a madman he goeth between love and fear. Hark ye, he is even now without."

"Then dress me and help me to the couch in the outer chamber and I will speak with him."

So she laid her on the couch and the prince entered, and when he saw her, how pale she was after her terrible beating and long fast, he was abashed and came and knelt down by her. Then Torfrida put out her hand and he kissed it.

"What manner of prince or knight art thou that presseth thy suit even though the lady lie sick unto death? Is this the way of princes?"

Now the prince was young, if old in riotous living, and the sight of a noble and beautiful maiden had not lost its hold upon him, even though his fears for his own safety filled him.

He answered not, and Torfrida knew that she had shamed him.

“Have I not sent word that I would see thee when I am cured of this sickness? Better treatment would I receive at the hands of a common man. If thou lovest me let me be till I am whole.”

“If I might but kiss thy lips I will rest me content, sweet lady, till thou art healed.”

“Thou wilt act as a prince only an thou mayest kiss me. Thou wouldst kiss when thou hast not wooed me; surely thou hast a way of wooing of thine own.”

“Say no more, I will leave thee, but keep me not long, I implore thee.”

“Here, thou mayest kiss my hand an thou art so minded. Now, get thee gone.”

Then the prince returned and no sooner had he reached the hall than he stamped and swore in rage, and called himself fool and faint of heart; for he had been overcome by a woman, though he had sworn to his followers that he would wed Torfrida that day, sick or well. So he was much haunted by fears and doubts, and knew no rest either day or night. Two days later he went again to Torfrida's chamber door

and knocked. Then Torfrida took from her finger a ring which held a rare stone of wondrous lustre, and she gave it to the tire-woman, who took it to the prince, telling him that Torfrida saw that he was indeed a gentle prince and knight. So the prince went down to the hall again and the barons laughed at him and nodded to each other, saying that the woman was too clever for him. The prince was angry and drank deep, and the waiting-woman told Torfrida what they were saying in the hall.

CHAPTER XXIV

OF THE CASTLE IN THE PENTLANDS

Now the prince had been absent from his father's hall for many days and feared his anger or that suspicion might fall upon him; so that night he took his horse and rode into the city of Camelon and entered his father's hall. There he found Feargus talking with the king. When the prince entered, Feargus turned to withdraw and, in a moment, beheld the wondrous ring on the prince's finger; then his heart leapt for very joy, for in dire trouble had he been. So he went out and donned his byrny and slung his great sword over his shoulder, and then, covering it all with the habit of a wandering minstrel, took his harp, the clarsach, or small harp of the Gael, and made himself a beard of great length and whiteness so that, having donned it, none could know him. He then went forth, mounted on a sorry nag, which laboured so under his weight that he had pity on it and sighed for his great grey horse.

He rode to the outskirts of the town and there waited the prince's coming. Long after midnight he approached with a strong company of warriors, and Feargus dismounted and sat upon a fallen tree, and as the prince drew nigh played a plaintive tune. With the clarsach and pipe the Picts excelled, and of them few could be likened to Feargus for skill. Now the prince was filled with thoughts of love, yet was he angry at having been so thwarted, and fearful also for his own life. So when he heard the harp in the still night he turned to the harper and drew in his beast, whereupon Feargus sang this song:—

THE BOON OF LIFE

I sing the greatest boon of life—
'Tis not the torrent's glorious strife,
Sun-dappled paths where nature weaves
A paradise amongst the leaves,
Or forest depths, the wild deer's haunt,
'Tis not of these I make my vaunt,
Nay, not of these!

'Tis not the friends kind fate hath sent
Full of brave thoughts and hardiment,
Though at your back a stalwart friend
His blade will swing, swift to defend,
Nor heed though foemen be a host,
Yet not of these I make my boast,
Nay, not of these!

Whose face is fresh as morning fair,
Whose hands the whitest anywhere,
What is the one thing I can praise,
With all my heart through all my days,
With all the life that me doth move?
'Tis only love, ah, yes, 'tis love!

The prince listened till the end of the song, and said he, "Thou hast wondrous skill, good minstrel; never heard I the like, nay, and the song thou singest pleaseth me."

Then Feargus answered, imitating the broken English of the Lothian Britons, "Yes, sir knight, but I am old and my hand will not long keep its cunning."

"Here's gold to thee, and, if thou art willing, thou mayest come with me this night, for there is much merriment in my hall and I am to wed a fair lady to-morrow."

"That will I gladly, sir knight, but my beast is old and weary and can go but slowly."

"An thou canst play as thou wert doing a minute since I will wait on thy beast and ride with thee."

Then Feargus arose, but made as though he were bent and decrepit, and, mounting his beast, rode on behind the prince; but they went but slowly for the horse of Feargus was overdone,

and Feargus was a merciful man and loved all breathing things. At length they won the castle, and Feargus marked it well. It lay between high hills in a narrow glen, and to the west were two hills with conical tops; ¹ it was a great building of wood, stone, and earth and had many towers, some tall and narrow and pointed, others in the style of the Roman city of Camelon, which could be seen lying in the plain to the north-west, from the great brae up which they wended by the hill of Bonaly. Close by the castle stretched a loch and the hills encompassed it. It was the last outpost of the English of Lothian built to keep back the native people who still held out in the wide moors and fastnesses. They entered over the drawbridge and the prince bade his servants give the minstrel meat and drink and then bring him to the hall. They set the meat before him and he ate heartily, so that they were astonished he being so old a man. Then said the seneschal, "Methinks thou hast had a mighty frame in thy youth, good minstrel." "Aye, and thou hast handled a sword as well as a harp methinks, father," said another.

Then Feargus arose. "Yes," he said, "I

¹ The hills in Glencorse now known as East and West Kip.

have used the harp and the sword, but better I love the harp which makes men merry than the sword which makes them sad."

"Thou sayest sooth," said the seneschal, and Feargus took his harp and soon, such was his skill, and such was the beauty of the music of Albainn which he played, that they forgot the harper and cried, "Well done! well done! thou art the king of minstrels."

They took him to the hall and there, as he entered, he beheld the prince seated at the middle of the table and at his right hand and his left a great and motley company of wild and savage men, on the faces of most of whom drunkenness had left its mark. The prince himself was a man of bloated visage, but well featured and powerful of form and with an air of some courtliness. He was, moreover, much younger than most of his companions. At his right hand sat Torfrida dressed in red and cloth of gold, a jewel of wondrous beauty in her hair. Feargus thought her pale at first, but so lively and bright was she, and so merrily she chatted with the prince, that he was surprised. Instead of finding her distressed he found her gay, and so far from being appalled by the thought of her

marriage with the prince on the coming day, she was bright and lively. Feargus looked again—this was no feigned composure or merriment. Had she forgotten him, and, glad to escape the dangers of their journey, was she going to wed the prince? The thought flashed across his brain only to be crushed back, and he was ashamed that it had even entered his heart. A merry peal of laughter rang through the hall and thrilled him, and the thought returned again, again to be forced back. Then he struck his harp, avoiding all those airs which Torfrida knew, and so, the meal over, Torfrida sped lightly through the hall to her chamber leaning on the arm of the prince. Feargus stood up in the corridor as they passed, for move he could not, and he watched her bid her farewell at the door, she giving him her hand to kiss and waving it to him as he passed along to the hall. And when the door of her chamber closed on her Feargus felt his knees give under him; his strength melted away; his body shook so that his harp nigh fell from his hands. Anger against her he felt none but only grief. There life ended for him; all the pain, the weariness, the danger he had passed through for her and with her,

returned to him and crushed him. Now he was in the snowstorm, now in the robbers' cave, now he leapt into the waters of Aire after the host of Penda; now she plucked him by the beard and awoke him from his madness with her touch—how beautiful she looked in that moment of recognition, was ever human creature so lovely before! Then he saw her dying face upturned in the boat and cut his arm that she might drink. Anger—no, he could never feel anger towards her, and towards him—if she loved him he should go unscathed, and what help he could give should be his. Then the water gathered in his eyes and despair seized him, and he groped with his hand for his sword to slay himself, and then he staggered forward a step or two and sank to earth knowing no more.

CHAPTER XXV

OF THE FEAST IN SIEGFRIED'S HALL

LONG time he lay, till at length he became ware of one kneeling beside him, while strong wine was poured between his teeth; then soft lips kissed his forehead and a soft voice whispered in his ear, "Awake, oh, awake! Oh, what aileth thee, my Feargus? Now thou openest thine eyes. Thanks be to God! hadst thou died I would have slain myself—there, drink a little." And then she kissed him again and wept and kissed, between joy and grief. "Canst thou arise," she said at length, "for there is danger in lying here lest any should come. Better sit in my chamber till thou art well—my tire-woman is abed."

So Feargus arose and stepped into the light, but he no longer dare look at her, but stood before her shamefaced and cringed on the ground beneath, kissing her feet and asking forgiveness.

"I know not what it is that I must forgive;

what hast thou ever done that should need my forgiveness? ”

Then Feargus told her and she went white and trembled, and wept again, and refused his kisses and turned from him, till at last she forgave him and he arose. And she told him all that had happened since she was taken captive, and how she had set the tapestry on fire and been beaten by the earl's mother and had tried to find the battlements to fling herself from them, and how she had gone instead into the hall where her enemy was and been again sorely beaten. And he was full of rage and indignation and grief and shame at his own doubts of one so noble and devoted.

“ Then,” said she, “ know that I knew thee the moment thou didst enter despite thy disguise, for no other harper that ever me saw doth hold his harp as fondly and strike it just as thou dost; but even had this not been so, I should have known thee for Feargus among ten thousand, and so overjoyed was I at seeing thee that I could scarce contain myself, for never did I think the ring would betray him so quickly and I had little hope indeed. Now thou must go, and at thy signal I will do as thou hast bidden me, to-morrow, and I pray we may get hence

with whole skins, but my heart fails me at the thought."

"Much have we come through and it will go hard if we do not escape from this place."

So he departed to the hall and lay among the rushes on the floor, where he slept soundly, many dangers having taught him to sleep when he might, that his strength should be husbanded. When the folk began to stir about the castle he arose, and, breakfasting with the soldiers, waited in the hall while they got ready a great feast, for that day the prince was to wed the strange lady and he and his friends were to make merry. So the hour of the feast drew nigh and the nobles entered and took their places at the board on either side the prince. On the right hand was Torfrida, dressed in a long white gown, about which in cunning wise was drawn a sash of gold. The veil which had half hidden her face yesterday had gone, and her fair hair with its shining depths of red and gold fell down over her shoulders in simple fashion. So lovely she looked, and so young and fresh and ruddy, that a murmur arose from the rough soldiers and serving men as she entered, and even the loose, low sots who sat round the board gazed upon her for

a moment open-mouthed. And they ceased to wonder how it was that the strange maiden had been able to make their master put off the wedding, day by day. Feargus, who sat among the servants at the opposite end of the table, had been playing, but as she entered his hand had fallen, and he stopped to gaze with the rest. Seeing this the prince turned and said, "Why stoppest thou, minstrel? When I bid thee thou mayest stop."

Then there entered a few other women, wives of the nobles, coarse and red-faced like their lords with much eating and drinking. By them Torfrida looked the fairer. The feast began, and thereafter the wine cup went round and Feargus played his merriest music that they might drink the more. Soon there was no man among them that had not taken more than enough and some grew noisy, and shouts and oaths filled the hall, while some lay asleeping with their heads on the board. And so mad was the music that many drank still, till at length the prince arose, his face flushed and hand unsteady, and cried, "A toast with me, my friends; I pledge the bonniest lady in Lothian!"

"Nay, now, sir prince, how shall they know

that thy words be true unless thou tellest whose lady she is that thou dost pledge, for there may be some here who hold their own ladies the bonniest."

"Thou hast over much to say for thyself, sir minstrel. I tell thee I will break the head of him who will refuse to drink this toast with me: the lady I speak of is mine."

"Nay, then, prince, my head must thou break, for her I hold to be the fairest lady in this company is mine."

"Ha, ha! what new foolery is this to please the company? Go on, minstrel, it must be something of great wit to warrant thy assurance. Here is an old coxcomb indeed, friends." And the laugh went round. And Feargus sang this song, thinking to sober the company a little and hoping to escape without bloodshed:—

AH, YES, 'TWERE WELL!

I take my lyre—what should I sing
Of love who makes my soul her harp,
Whose frowns awake each stented string
To tones how sad, how sweet, how sharp!

At other times love is my guide
And to the sunlight leads my feet,
By silver streams and leafy ways
And langourous meadows cool and sweet.

Yet life it hath a toilsome road,
With many a heart-break, many a thorn;
And all men stagger 'neath their load
From twilight unto morn.

Yet had life nothing good but she,
Love's laughing eyes would grief dispel;
So it were well, content I'd be,
If but love came, ah, yes! 'twere well!

The song pleased the love-sick prince and there was a round of cheers ere Feargus had done.

"Thou art indeed a good minstrel," said the prince, "but now to the toast."

"Yea, he singeth well, but he hath had over much wine and his head is not so strong as it once was," said one.

"Nay, good sir knight, thou art mistaken, wine hath not passed these lips to-day, for I drink wine but sparingly; but I hold that no man may drink this pledge an he hath a lady whom he holdeth fairest."

"Thou art mad; sit thee down," roared the prince, "or a halter shall sit where thy lady's arm should be."

"Thou wilt at least put me to the proof, and ye gentlemen all. I swear that when I ask, the bonniest lady shall arise and walk to me across

the hall, or, an she doth not, thou mayest hang me forthwith."

Then followed roars of rude laughter, and shouts of, "Where is she?" "Bring her forth," and others shouted, "'Twill be a good jest; let the minstrel have his way."

"Go on then, minstrel," said the prince, "since it is the wish of the company."

"That will I, but thou must first give me thy pledge that if I fail not, then wilt thou allow my lady and myself to leave thy halls unmolested and without scath, and will leave us to wend our way as we may list, on two good beasts of thy stable."

"Thou art beside thyself. How could it profit us to keep the lady of such as thou?"

Then the nobles, who began to feel a kind of curiosity stirring them, said, "This is so persistent a madman that we must needs let him have his way."

"I swear to thee, minstrel," said the prince, "to do as thou sayest, an thou succeed, and, moreover, I swear to hang thee an thou failest."

Feargus turned to the knights and called them to witness, and then rose and taking his long staff bound round with thongs, and his harp, he

walked down the hall to the door and standing with his back against it struck a few notes on his harp and sang this verse in strong, clear tones:—

“ When I call she will arise
 'Spite the fears that fill her eyes;
 When I suffer she will weep
 For her love is boundless deep.

Yet than I she's nobler far,
 Beautiful as still streams are,
 Pure as is the purest thought,
 Or as dew the night hath brought.

Yet she is my willing slave,
 Full of fears, she will be brave
 When I call, and come to me,
 For her love is as the sea.”

The passionate tones of the singer had stirred his hearers and the laugh died out on their lips ere he had finished the first bar. Mere curiosity had become keen interest, and there was a pause in the buzz and murmur that had filled the hall. He reached his right hand to his left shoulder and from beneath the loose red plaid he wore drew forth his great sword. This was the signal. Torfrida arose from her place and, ere the astonished prince could collect his senses, tripped lightly down the hall and stood beside the aged minstrel, the company being too much astonished to hinder her. Siegfried started up in great

rage, and made towards them. Quickly and with wondrous strength did Feargus draw some ponderous benches that lay about to the front of him as a fence, and warned the prince back.

“ Prince, thou hast sworn, and all the company hath witnessed; be not rash, for an thou break promise given, thou wilt lose such worship as is left to thee. And I ask ye, knights and gentlemen, to see right done.”

Many were for Feargus, but the prince still advanced, slowly and with great labour clearing the benches from before him as he went. Then Feargus set down his harp, and handed his long staff, which was his bow, to Torfrida that she might free it of the thongs which had served to hide it, and he started to his full height and cast off his grey beard and his rags and stood big and strong in his byrny with his great sword in his palm. Then those who had unwillingly followed their master held back, for they knew him the captain of the king's guard.

“ Thou hast stolen my lady, and I am come to rescue her, and be he earl or boor, he that goeth to stay me shall die.”

Then the prince, mad with rage, drew forth his sword and with many oaths advanced upon

him, followed by those of his own Northumbrians who were present. The others, Britons from Strathclyde and Lothian and Southern Picts who had submitted to the rule of the strangers, saw that the minstrel was a Pict, and their jealousy of the Northumbrians being aroused they were less ready to see so gross a wrong done to one of their race.

"Now he is a coward and recreant chief who keeps not his pledge," cried Feargus, "and they be coward knights who help a lying leader."

Then the Britons tried to reason with the prince, but in vain, still he came on, followed by his drunken rout.

"Back, prince, or thou shalt die," said Feargus once more, wishing to spare the spilling of blood. Drunk and mad with anger, however, the prince heeded not, but laid his steel against that of Feargus, though it was only a moment ere the sword of Feargus was buried in his body, and the blood of him leaped up suddenly from his mouth and, to the horror of his men, he fell back dead. Then Feargus tried to stop the Northumbrians, stout fighting men and big of body, but they would not hearken to him, coming on crying, "Down with him! he hath killed the

prince! " They pressed against him on the right hand and the left, but so close the one upon the other that they had little space to move, while lightly Feargus swung his brand from behind the benches, so that they could not get into him, and legs and arms were shorn in its sweep, until there lay before him a confused and bloody mound, mixed up with wine cups and meat and drink and table gear, and still the Picts and Britons withheld from the strife. But Feargus knew that the fight must go against him, so thick and fast they came, wounding and trampling on each other in their eagerness to get at him. Then, wounded and weary of so much sword play, in a pause of the fight he cried out in Gaelic, " Now here am I, Feargus, son to king Nechtan of the Hundred Fights, and kin to all ye Picts and Britons, and my lady is of the South Albanich by her mother's side. Yet though of these Northumbrians I have slain some and maimed more, till I am sick of slaughter, yet my lady and I must fall, so many are our enemies. Never a friend shall he lack though all the world be turned against him who helpeth me."

Then said one to his fellows, " This must indeed be Feargus, king Penda's captain, for

never saw I man so giant-like or of so great strength and hardihood. All that man can do hath he done; shameful and unknightly of us were it to see him, our kin, who is in his right, destroyed." Then many of the others agreed, though they were loth to join the fray, fearing for their own lands. But he who had spoken first, one Llewellyn of the Gwynedd tribe of Britons whose lands had stretched up into the Lothians, stepped to the leader of the Northumbrians and for a moment the fight ceased.

"Now," said he, "ye men of Northumbria, ye have had your fill of fighting and it is dastardly of all ye to attack one, though he hath ye at some advantage. Surely your king would little admire ye."

"Hath he not slain our prince? right angry will be the king. Not one of us dare face him without this man's head, stark though he be, for he is son to king Nechtan and it must be he who was Penda's captain."

"Then no hand will we have in this unknightly work; but we bid ye desist, or an ye do not we will join with Feargus, and what could we not do under so mighty a leader? "

Feargus spoke out to the Lindeseymen. "Now,

ye men of Lindesey, this, my lady, is Torfrida, daughter of Sigmund, your king, and ye, men of Mercia, I have bled for your king, and two hundred of my men fought for him when others fled, and all died for him at the last. If ye do not help me we must fall."

Then one Lindeseyman said: "I saw him save prince Edwy and his thanes from the Mercians. I will help him."

"And I saw him stop the slaughter of the Lindeseymen," said another.

"And I was with him when he held the cliffs for Penda on Trent water," said a Mercian.

"And I when he saved the day for Mercia at Camulodunum in East Anglia."

"And I, and I," said others.

So all these who had held aloof came down over the barriers and stood beside him.

"And I and all Lindeseymen will fight for Torfrida," said another thane. And he cried, "Lindesey! Lindesey!" and behind him followed the rest of the Lindeseymen crying, "Lindesey! Lindesey!" And the Mercian thanes cried the cry of "Penda! Penda!" that held armies spell-bound with fear in the old days, and all the Mercians joined them,

Then said Llewelin of the Gwynedd to the Northumbrians, "Let no more blood be spilt. We do not want to fight ye, Northumbrians; we would be friends."

Getting scornful reply they drew their swords and fell mightily upon the Northumbrians. And the clang of sword on helm, and the rushing and hurrying of mailed feet, and the cries of "Lindesey! Lindesey!" "Penda! Penda!" filled the hall, where late had been merriment and a different music. And no more terrible and savage sight fell ever on the eye of Feargus. Torfrida had long fainted for very horror of it. And when the din ceased there was no Northumbrian left standing unwounded out of all that throng.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RESCUE

AND when that fight was done the Britons and others paused awhile, speechless, awe-stricken, at the scene, and not without fear, for they dreaded the wrath of the king. They spoke among themselves, Feargus meanwhile carried Torfrida down out of the hall to her own chamber, and bade her make ready to depart. Then to the British knights he said, "Much do I owe ye for great service done, and I pledge me that if ever ye win my land I will requite ye, as much as gold can requite service like to this. And as ye are many I advise ye to go in small companies, and I will likewise, and go ye into your own lands quickly. And if any trouble fall upon ye now or in time to come send ye to me and I will not be tardy in helping ye both with men and ships."

So they parted with great friendship, and Feargus descended into the stable with Torfrida,

and chose therefrom the two best steeds and rode forth.

Within the castle, the victors bade their men to gather the wine cups and arms and horses from the stable, and every beast was laden with the spoil. And it fell that as they rode through the wood northward, making great haste to get out of king Sigeberht's land, Feargus said, "Behold, how the castle of prince Siegfried burneth," and Torfrida turned and saw that all the lift was lit up at the back of them and filled with sparks of burning timber without number. A moment they gazed awe-stricken at the glorious sight. And they met many people on their road, but these being mostly British stood not in their way. After they had gone many miles they made the coast and found one ready to ferry them over Forth, and so they got aboard with their two beasts and sailed up beyond the Ochils and there landed, and once more made their way northward. At length they drew nigh to the city where dwelt the king of the South Picts and were for going straight forward hoping to pass by unseen of the people. Hardly had they got within sight of the town, however, before they saw a party of horse and foot, the

footmen being so fleet that they kept pace with the horses. They quickly came round Feargus, but he warned them to lay no hand on either his lady or himself, but the captain laughed and rode at him crying, "Render thyself up, for thou art our prisoner and must come before the king."

"I will come before the king, sir captain, but I warn thee that no man's hand will I allow on my bridle."

The captain laughed again, and stretched forth his hand, whereupon Feargus struck him with his sheathed sword that he fell senseless. Then quickly turning their horses' heads they wheeled suddenly, leaving the soldiers behind them, and dashed across towards the gate of the city. There they entered and rode up to the king's hall and were surrounded by his people, and the party which had been sent to bring them in now coming, took them to the king, who ordered that they should be cast into prison, for Feargus did not tell them that he was king Nechtan's son, thinking they might deem him so rich a prize that they would not readily release him. Then was Feargus much downcast, for his spirits had been high at thought that they

were near his own land after so many wanderings.

Now it fell that there was one Domlech, a man of the North Picts, staying in the town at that time; he had come as a messenger from king Nechtan, and he beheld Feargus when he entered with Torfrida. By his speech, which differed slightly from that of the Southern Picts, he knew him to be a countryman of his, and by the richness of his byrny he judged him to be a chief. Domlech, however, said nothing, deeming it best to keep his own counsel till he won home to king Nechtan. And when the old king heard that one who was seemingly a great chief of his people had been taken by the king of the South Picts, he was angry, and sent a captain who was well known throughout the land as a mighty warrior to demand the stranger and with him went a strong force. So Feargus and Torfrida had been prisoners but a week when one night the peal of the pipes burst upon the ear of Feargus and he knew it was the slogan of the king of Albainn. Here were his noble father Nechtan and his friends, and the end of his wanderings had come at last! An hour passed and he began to grow weary of waiting, when

the door opened and his jailor came in and bade him follow him, for his kinsmen of North Alban had come to demand him. So he was led up out of the dungeon to the light where he found Torfrida, and they saw that the Picts were all around the walls, having stolen up to the town silently, making no sound until they were at the very gates, when they demanded their kinsman, whoever he might be, who was held prisoner. Then the king of the South Picts agreed to release him if they would withdraw. And so they opened the gate, and they two rode out towards the captain who commanded the host of Nechtan. And Feargus could speak to no man so was he overcome at this so happy end to their troubles, and then at last they came into the captain's tent, and behold the captain was Duncan! And each had deemed the other dead, and like men bereft of their senses they gazed upon each other and fell to greeting for very gladness. By reason of their great strength it had chanced that Duncan and Alastair and some others of Feargus's company had been healed of their wounds at Winwid, and had found their way back to their king. So there was great rejoicing in the camp that night, and the towns-

people wondered why they moved not away but made so merry. In the morning they marched northward, and when they won the halls of Nechtan, Feargus entered alone, but it was with difficulty he passed the men who guarded the king, for none knew him. At length he called for Duncan to order that he should be let see the king and so won in, and came to the king's own chamber, and many stood about and looked at him and he at them, but they minded him not. Not so the king, for though he had thought him dead, and though he came now in strange arms, yet no sooner did he enter than the old man knew him and started back a moment and then clasped him to him and wept. And when the chiefs knew that the stranger was Feargus they made great rejoicing and drew him and Torfrida round their city in a chariot. And Torfrida was brought in, and the king was mightily pleased with her, and took great pride in his son, for he knew that between all those seas there was not a warrior like to him. And in the land, also, was great rejoicing, the fathers were as glad as though they had each found a son that was lost, and the sons as though they had found one of their brethren. For king Nechtan of the hundred

battles was greatly regarded, being one who never broke faith or failed an Albannach in need, and it was thus that in this present, he having sent to succour whom he thought a stranger had won a son instead. As to Torfrida, she was so overcome with joy at this happy end of their troubles that she kept her bed for a week and then arose to make ready for the marriage feast. Not a month had passed since they won home to Alban before a ship came thereto, and brought a messenger from Edwy, who told how Osbert had turned upon king Sigmund and slain him, and seized the kingdom and joined it to his own. After vainly trying to rouse his father's men to make war upon Osbert with him, their lawful king, Edwy had been forced to fly with a handful of faithful followers, and, reaching the fens before Osbert knew which way he had taken, sent his messenger in a small ship to Alban, asking the aid of the king of the Picts for the sake of Feargus, whom he had long thought dead, else he knew that he would have returned ere now to succour him.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FIGHT IN FENLAND

THEN did Feargus mind him of his promise to return to save his friend Edwy. So king Nechtan called a council and sent to his shipmen to make ready, and gathered together a host and set Feargus in command with Duncan and Alastair and others who had been in Mercia with Penda. And right gladly they armed them to serve once more their mighty captain; and on the morrow reached the ships and sailed for the land of Lindesey. So with good winds they soon made the coast and anchored fast their ships in the river Witham and sailed in smaller boats into the fen country; and when they had gotten well within it they landed, and made for the woods and there found Edwy at the trysting place. Right full of gladness were he and his men to see the Albanich, and when he beheld Feargus at their head he was like to one beside himself for gladness. Then said he to his men, " Now of a

surety shall my father be avenged and our country saved from the spoiler, for here is the greatest captain in all this land to lead us, with such a company of giants as was never seen, and every man a brother to his fellow, so that little wonder it is that they have always the victory."

Then said Feargus, "Now, good Edwy, we will to the war if thou wilt lead us through these marshes."

"We will have less journey to travel than methought at the first, for Osbert hath found that I have betaken me to the fens and for many days past we have been hunted like wolves, by men and dogs."

"Then what is thy wish?"

"The army of Osbert lieth only some twenty miles northward of us. My rede is that we march by night, keeping the woods by day, until we come up with them, and fall upon them privily in the dark, for by such means will we save our men and much bloodshed."

"Thy counsel is good; what dost think, Duncan, and thou, Alastair?"

"Better rede we cannot offer."

"Then so it shall be," said Feargus, "and how far doth their host lie from the river?"

“ Twenty miles from Witham by the water.”

“ And dost know the ground? ”

“ None should know it better.”

“ Then thou canst place us all around his camp, that we may attack together? ”

“ That can I, if thy men can keep silence.”

“ As silent as the stars they can be, or as the fish that swim in the sea. Let us row up to the point where Witham joins the Bane Water, and there leave the boats in among the reeds.”

That same night they hied them back to the boats and rowed up among all that fen water, and no man spoke, and no sound broke the night save the cry of the peaseweeps and the whaups which anon flew across the boats' track as they rowed. And the osiers swayed in the night wind and the long train of boats full of giant forms glided up the grey water. At length they landed and marched northward along the bank of the river Bane which flows into Witham. At daybreak they halted and lay in a small wood hard by until nightfall, then on. And when they drew nigh to where the host of Osbert lay, Feargus bid Duncan cross the stream to the west side and there strike through the wood a piece, when they were to turn them east till they

saw the camp of the enemy. Edwy he sent also on along the other bank to return upon Osbert when he had won north of his army, while Alastair was to close in likewise from the east shielded by the osiers. And Feargus himself held the south with the road to their boats. And so each force was to wait till its captain heard the signal from the other three, which he was to answer with a wolf's cry, at which they were to close in and attack, Edwy first with his Lindeseymen.

In Osbert's camp all was feasting and merriment that night, but at last the whole host lay sleeping, and even the watchers around the camp dozed ; till one, a half-drunk soldier, who paced the river side, heard the cry of the howlet from the wood which lay to the west of them, then answering cries from the northward and east, and the man wondered that so many owls should be about, and kicked the bits of wood into the stream with half-tipsy thoughtfulness. Twice the cry came again from the east, then Feargus from the south gave the answering cry—their first round of signals. Then each captain led his men in towards the camp and drew so near that, all being sunk in sleep, they could

hear the tread of the watchers. Still the soldier paced the water side, until of a sudden, close to him on the west, he heard the cry of the wolf, then from the north and east the same weird sound arose; then came a pause, and Feargus, peering through the bulrushes in the river, singled out the camp of Osbert himself. At that moment the sentry was wondering whether to call the night guard seeing there were so many wolves abroad, but he fixed an arrow in his bow and waited, stirring the fire to brighter blaze to scare the wild creatures. Then from the south Feargus uttered the cry which was the final signal and all in a moment came the sound of the rush of Edwy and his Lindeseymen through the long sweet meadow grass to the north of them and the death cry of a wounded Anglian arose into the night. In a moment the camp of Osbert was awake and men were running wildly hither and thither, tumbling over one another in their hurry to get their arms, and the captains shouted to the men and the men knew not what had happened. Then midst all the confusion came showers of arrows from the osier planting to the east, showers from the wood that skirted them to the west, and showers

from the bulrushes which lined the river bed. When they turned east the osiers started to life and dark and silent forms dashed forth to fall upon them like a frost wind upon the fields. Then the host of Osbert, half armed and half mad with fear, turned west, when the willow wood on that side of them rendered up its armed host, and Duncan and his Picts came upon them claymore in hand. Osbert's captains shouted once more for order and urged their men to stand fast and set out the bowmen, and Osbert himself marshalled them and encouraged those that wrought with spears here, there the swordsmen. But to the Anglians and Lindeseymen, used as they were to the noise and rush of battle, the war cry and the clash of arms, there was something fearsome in the silence of their foes, and in their unusual size and garb. Osbert, finding enemies on three sides of him now turned his men with their backs to the river to protect their flank, when lo! a shower of arrows flew among them from the flank and the Anglians who stood in the rear ranks fell in droves, and as the terrible sense of being trapped by a silent and unknown foe, of seemingly overwhelming numbers, crept over the terrified and demoralised

footmen, they heard the splash of water and the southward wing of the Picts under Feargus left their lair among the bulrushes, and dashed through the water breast deep. In an instant the river bank was alive with men of giant shape, who burst upon them, their long plaids floating in the wind behind, and for the first time the night was startled by the voices of their foemen as they raised the old shout of "Albanich! Albanich!" and from east and west came answering cries "Albanich! Albanich!" from the followers of Duncan and Alastair; while from the north rose the shout of "Lindesey! Lindesey! God save King Edwy!" Then Osbert knew that his old enemy had returned and that Edwy the hunted had turned hunter and had trapped the game, and he trembled. And there arose a din as though Babel were loosened. Again Osbert ordered his men to stand fast, but ordering was useless now, and after an hour's desperate fighting, utterly beaten, the whole host turned and fled over the dark fen. Then, seeing the Picts start in pursuit, Edwy called aloud to those near him, "Pardon to all! Let the others go, but spare not the murderer," and so he ran towards where he believed Osbert

to be, and it was then about the dawn so that he could well distinguish faces. Soon there started one up before him and struck the weapon suddenly from his hand, saying, "Ha! king of Lindesey, I have sought thee long; my time and thy time have come together," and so he rushed upon him, fury in his eyes.

"Nay, not so fast—thou canst war well on old men and boys; thou art able to fight bigger folk, and here is one for thee," said Duncan, "thou and I have long been debtors each to other."

Osbert waited no more, but turned suddenly upon him with all his force, but he had one to deal with stronger and more skilled than himself and he fell back, stabbed through the heart. So died the arch traitor who had given great trouble to many, whereof this history treats. Then Feargus and Duncan and Alastair brought in their men, and Feargus calling the Lindeseymen and all the captains around him, took the circlet of gold from the helm of Osbert and placed it on the brow of Edwy. Then all the warriors raised a great shout and cried, "God save king Edwy!" And so they fell to the booty, which they found in the camp of Osbert,

and made themselves a great feast. And after they had rested and feasted them, they marched across towards Lindum, taking with them the head of Osbert. When they reached the city set on the hill, the people came forth to meet them, and all men swore to follow the king.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HISTORY COMETH TO AN END

AND so Feargus and his Picts helped Edwy to clear the land of Lindesey and they sent word out to all the thanes around that Edwy was king of the lands of his fathers, and if any would not call him king there would be war with him and all the Picts with him upon his side. And so after awhile Feargus returned, leaving Alastair to be king Edwy's captain until all the land was brought under him. And they won Alban, and on the third day of their return was a great feast spread, and all the chiefs of that country were guests and many kings and princes, with Llewelin of Gwynedd and one MacGilliosa, a stout stranger from Galloway, and many Picts and Britons from Lothian, who had helped Feargus in times past, as this history showeth, for the beautiful and noble Torfrida, whose fame was in men's mouths as a heroine for all time, was wed to Feargus of Albainn, son to king Nechtan of the Hundred Battles.

ENGLAND IN PENDA'S DAY

OF the Britain of which the foregoing story treats we know but little, and the strong Anglo-Saxon bias of many otherwise excellent writers has obscured what few facts we really possess of the stormy times of the great and faithful patriot king Penda. It may be the case that the Saxons had a reputation for cruelty, as the late Mr. Freeman points out, but we can have no true picture of the England of those times if we imagine that our English or Saxon ancestors were ever numerous or barbarous enough to exterminate, as historians would have us believe they did, the native Welsh or British, except in rare instances. The foregoing story makes it clear that the "English," though a strong and well-organised handful of soldiers, were but a large handful after all, just as the Roman settlers, and Normans of later times, were but a handful compared to the whole population. Historians have based their beliefs in the Teutonic origin of the "English" people of to-day largely on language, on the fact that

the surnames of the majority of the people are English and that the language they speak to-day is chiefly of English origin. We know now that a language is not necessarily an index to the race of the people, but that it is often acquired by contact with another race who spoke it and who may or may not have been its original owners.

The story shows that the country was at that time covered with vast woods and forests, with fens and marshes to the east, and with wide stretches of mountain and waste on the north-west. In all these tracts, as well as in the strong cities of Roman-British origin, the natives were able to hold their own, or to make terms with their Anglo-Saxon conquerors. It was only very slowly that those who served the conquerors as slaves or villeins adopted English names, as documentary evidence shows, even in the east of England, which has been assumed rather rashly to be the most Teutonic part of the island. The bands of outlaws, who were so noted even as late as the time of Edward III. in the Forest of Arden in Warwickshire, in Charnwood Forest, in Waltham Forest, and in the Fens of Bedford, Lincoln, and the East generally, were probably British refugees or their descendants.

The story of Feargus it is hoped will help the reader to understand the close kinship of both English and Scots with the "Welsh." It is certainly time that we realised the fact that those Britons whom "Anglo-Saxon" writers have despised were really at that time a civilised and Christian race who had moreover been in contact with the highest culture the world possessed for a period of no less than five hundred years. We must ultimately realise that it is to them and to the admixture of Roman blood amongst them, rather than to the savage fighting men by whom they were conquered, or to the still more ruthless Norsemen who came later, that we owe the great beginnings of the civilisation of which we make so much to-day.

England in Penda's time was broken up into at least twenty small kingdoms which were more or less independent; he made Mercia a great power by his statesman-like alliances with the smaller kingdoms and with the natives, both British and Picts, Christian and heathen. These states included the North English of the Osbert of our story; the Middle English, the South English, the Hwiccas, and the Gainas and Lindeseymen of Sigmund, whose names still survive in Gainsborough

and in the district of Lindsey in Lincolnshire. To the east were the East Anglians, to the south the kingdom of Wessex. To the west of Mercia dwelt the tribes of South Wales, while the territory of the great Christian race of the Gwynedd included North Wales and stretched up into the region of Strathclyde, which, roughly speaking, was composed of Westmorland, Cumberland, and the central and, excepting Galloway, the western part of Southern Scotland as far as the river Forth and the great Romano-British city of Camelon on the Roman wall near Falkirk.

The northern Cymry or Gwynedd had, however, been separated from their kinsmen to the south owing to the important capture of Chester and the Wirral Peninsula by Ethelfrith, king of Northumbria in 607. It is to them we owe one of the most beautiful and refined cycles of folk tales in Europe—the legends of Arthur and the far earlier mythological stories translated by Lady Charlotte Guest in the *Mabinogion*, of which they were a development and somewhat of a medley. In every respect, save possession of the ruthlessness and strength which characterise savage races, the Gwynedd were in advance of

their conquerors whose very heathenism was of a comparatively low type.

When Penda began his reign the dominant power was Northumbria, but the overthrow of its great king Edwin by Penda and Cadwalla, king of the Gwynedd, brought Mercia to the first place.

The list of Penda's subsequent victories is a long one and more brilliant than that of any general of his times, not excepting the Welsh hero Cadwalla. On his overthrow after thirty years of victory Mercia for a few months passed under the rule of Northumbria, but was restored to Penda's son Wulfere by the act of the Mercians themselves. His older son, Peada, had married Oswy's daughter and already adopted Christianity. Under him and his brother Wulfere Mercia became Christian, though this probably only meant that the king and court were "converted" and the people were expected to follow. The men who were really in earnest in the spread either of Christianity or Heathenism, like Edwin, Penda, Oswald, Oswy, and Peada, were few. They, and Penda, the great ruler and organiser, stood out from among their fellows as giants amongst pigmies and gave their mental and moral backbone to the English people. So solid indeed were

the foundations which Penda had laid in Mercia that for nearly two centuries after she maintained her place as practically the first power in Britain.

Penda "the Strenuous," being a heathen, has received scant justice at the hands of Christian writers, but even they have reluctantly admitted his possession of that chief mark of civilisation—tolerance. His character has also puzzled modern historians, but puzzled them needlessly I think, for the few facts we have give the key to the position. It is clear that the advanced and Christian British would not have joined hands with him had he shown any inclination to force his heathenism upon them. In the same way had he intended to conquer them, which was the averred purpose of Christian Northumbria, they would not have chosen him their political ally, nor would the small midland states around him. What then seems to have attracted them alike was his unaggressive spirit towards the unaggressive—the British and the small states—and the tremendous antagonism he showed to any attempt at aggression on the part of the larger kingdoms—Northumbria, East Anglia, and Wessex. Though the small kingdoms are massed together by historians under the general title of "Mercia" they appear

under Penda's guidance to have really retained their integrity and their kings and ealdormen and to have formed a defensive federation rather than a single state. This may have been the secret of Penda's power and of Mercia's greatness.

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